REX LEE
GYPSY FLYER

THOMSON BURTIS

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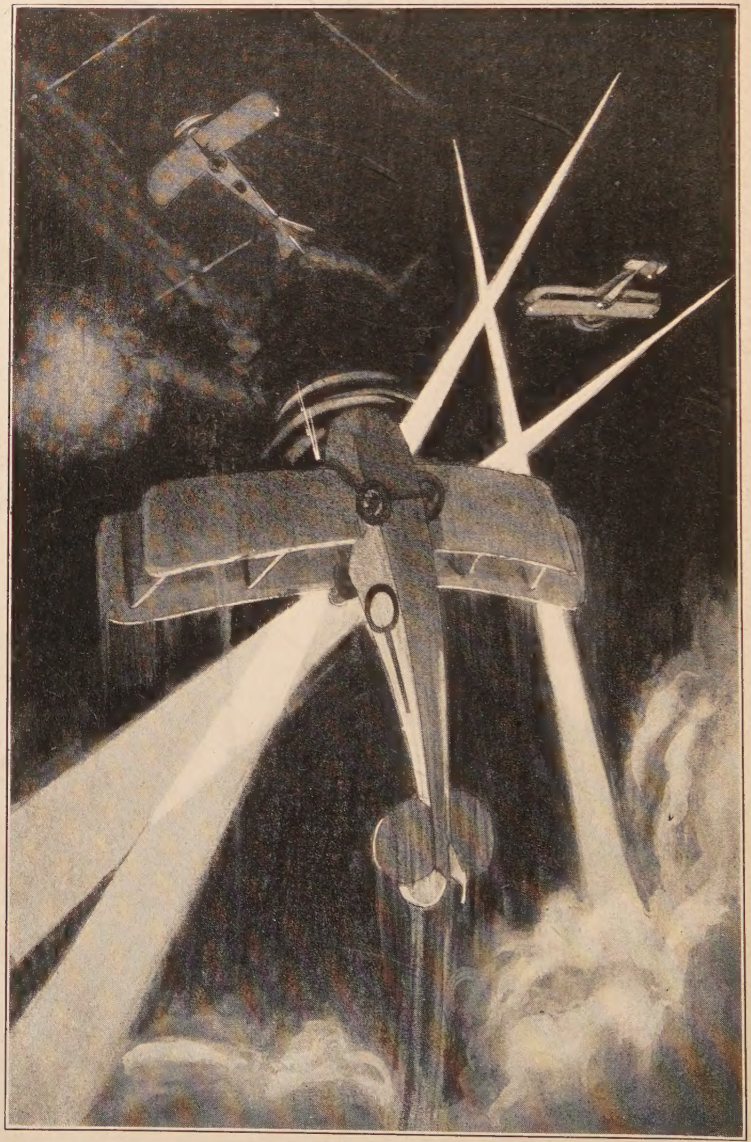

BEFORE THE PILOT COULD REGAIN HIS SPEED REX WAS DIVING DOWN AT HIM.

Rex Lee, Gypsy Flyer. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 202)

REX LEE, GYPSY FLYER

BY

THOMSON BURTIS

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REX LEE, GYPSY FLYER

CHAPTER I

THE BOY IN THE SILVER SHIP

Rex Lee, squinting a little as the brilliant Texas sun beat down through the Pullman window, nearly broke himself in two to get a last glimpse of the little biplane zipping along above the westbound train. It would be going back now—

Rex gulped down the lump in his throat that had been getting bigger ever since he had left San Antonio, an hour earlier. Kelly Field was behind him now, and he was going to leave it behind! Still, it was no easy task for a fellow to shake from his sturdy six-foot frame, in one instant, the love for the thrill of a hurtling plane that two years of study and training and intense desire had given him. He strained to watch as the little Army Hawk passed almost

out of his range of vision. Just at the last moment, he saw an arm emerge beside the pilot's helmeted head; it waved a parting salute at the train.

"So long, Don!" he breathed.

Then he settled himself back on the green plush cushions, determined that sorrow for himself wasn't going to get the better of him. He took up a magazine lying beside him, leafed over the pages. But he didn't read it. In a moment his blue eyes were staring out over the bare plains framed into kaleidoscopic pictures by the window; his bronzed, sun-and-wind weathered face relaxed as he lived over the two years he was just finishing.

They hadn't been an easy two years. The life of a cadet flyer at an army field is not easy. But Rex Lee was not thinking of the dark spots —his mind brought back to him only glowing pictures. That day when he had enlisted— when he had at last taken the step of which he had dreamed for years, ever since he built his first airplane model . . .

He was going to be a pilot!

There had been months of ground school. He had learned everything there was to know

about the construction and operation and servicing of a dozen different types of ships. He had loved them all—his good friend Don Goodhue had snickered at him a dozen times for the meticulous care he had given disreputable old crates. He could take them apart and put them together—and in time it came to be said at the field that "that bird Lee could make anything from an orange box to a casket look like an airplane."

Then there had been flying. The thrill of the first time he went into the air—and the disappointment because he was actually five feet off the ground before he realized that the ship was flying! He had taken to it naturally. Rex Lee was ready for solo flights two weeks before anybody else in his company.

"What a ham I was!" His eyes twinkled as he thought of the early boners he had pulled. But somehow he had cracked up fewer ships than anybody else. It soon was as easy for him as riding a bicycle. He had learned loops and Immelmans, intricate falling leaves and a dozen other flying tricks that meant he was at last an expert flyer. He had looked forward to going on up in the army aviation service—in

fact, the big chief had told him he could count on it when he had been selected from thirty pilots to act as the chief's special air-chauffeur.

Those two years had slipped by like two months. Then, suddenly, his plans had been blasted. Out in Los Angeles an almost forgotten uncle had died, and left a few thousand dollars to Rex. He had had to go out there to see about it, and he found that, in order to save anything from the near-wreck of a badly-managed hardware store, he would have to be on the ground.

"I won't do it!" he had told Don Goodhue miserably a dozen times. "I'm going to stay in the army—"

But Don had bulldozed him into changing his mind.

"Don't be a wall-eyed ninny—if anything can keep you from it!" the slim, handsome flyer had drawled. "If any long-lost uncle of mine should toss four or five thousand shekels into my lap, I'd go all the way to Patagonia and run a walrus-ranch—or whatever they run in Patagonia—to get it!"

Others had advised him similarly. Hard-boiled little Captain Kennard had grunted his

opinion of anybody who would prefer flying over Texas sandhills to living in southern California. But his rough voice had deepened when he shook hands with Rex that morning.

"We hate to have you go, old sox," he had said, with a vise-like grip. "If you ever need any friends—"

That had made it easier—that and Don's flying out over the train to wave him a final farewell. And so here he was—headed for Los Angeles and the pots and pans business!

Well, it probably was the thing to do. Eventually he would get that business going, and sell it. What he'd do with the money he didn't know—four or five thousand wouldn't go very far in making him an airplane magnate!

He felt the blueness coming back, and he turned to the magazine again. Something to get his mind off flying was what he wanted. Here was a sea-story—"The Boy in the Silver Ship." He'd try that.

And in the third line he found the word "aircraft"! He couldn't get away from it. Well, it sounded good. He read ahead:

"Slim" Lindley's six feet two of lanky

gristle and bone was draped in a chair in the office of the Robinson Aircraft Corporation. One long leg was thrown over an arm of the chair, and a newspaper had dropped to the floor. His steady blue eyes were resting on the wall before him, but he did not see the wall itself. He seemed to be looking far into the distance, watching the creatures of his imagination as they took shape, and then dissolved, in endless procession.

He did not even hear Major Robinson, his boss, when he entered the office. The peppery little major grinned as he saw his chief pilot —dreaming again. The major was not only commanding officer of the National Guard outfit in which Slim was a captain, but he was also the president of the company that had the contract to fly mail between Chicago and St. Louis.

Robinson's eyes dropped to the forgotten newspaper, and a headline leaped out at him from the pages. "Commander Fowler, North Pole Flyer, will Attempt Paris Flight for Orteig Prize."

His sharp-featured face lighted up again with that flashing smile.

"Thinking of flying to Paris?" he demanded cheerily.

Lindley's head turned slowly, and for a second he seemed to be still in the grip of his imagination. Robinson, gazing into his eyes, felt, for the hundredth time, a sense of bewilderment in the presence of his twenty-five-year-old employee. Sometimes there was something uncanny in that clear gaze—

"Oh, I'd like to, sure," Lindley said, and as his eyes focused on the major's a shy, half-shamed grin lit up his tanned face. He pushed the tousled blond hair back from his forehead with the diffidence of a boy who is embarrassed because someone has discovered a secret place in his heart.

"Well, twenty-five thousand bucks is a lot of money," laughed Robinson as he sat down at his desk. "But thirty-six hundred miles is a lot of miles—and the Atlantic is quite a puddle!"

"Uh-huh. But it can be done."

"Oh, it will be some day, sure."

"Bill Maloney—friend of mine who's got a little airplane factory out in San Diego—has the best ship for the job, too. Just change the

design a little—more gas, a little more wing-spread to carry it—"

Robinson whirled around and looked deep into the clear young eyes before him.

"What makes you say that? Been investigating?"

Again that bashful grin crept across Lindley's clean-cut face.

"Uh-huh," he said slowly. "Been looking up all kinds of ships and motors—just to pass the time away."

As though uncomfortable beneath the gaze of his boss, he got to his feet. His blue suit was far from well pressed, and the bottoms of the trousers were not very close to the tops of his shoes. His slight stoop didn't help the fit of the coat, either. Somehow, clothes were just a necessary evil to Slim. He never thought about appearance.

He smiled again, a curiously wistful smile, and said casually:

"Well, I'll run along and test Number 3. If I stay here you'll kid the pants off me."

Robinson chuckled, but his eyes were unusually bright as he said:

"I suppose you've got everything figured out.

You would have. Even your navigator—''

"I wouldn't take one."

"What? Say, air castles are all right, but even *they* can be too foolish, young fellow! Why—''

"I wouldn't want another fellow to risk his neck on me," Lindley said calmly. "And it would spoil the design I've got figured out. Gosh!" His face expanded in a broad grin that narrowed his eyes and seemed to spread from ear to ear. Deep in those eyes, though, there was unutterable longing. "If this isn't good! Here I'm laying down the law—you and I arguing about a navigator to Paris just before I test an air mail ship. We'll be fighting about where to stop in Paris next!"

Robinson laughed with him, but the aggressive little pioneer in the business of flying asked several more questions, too. There was no doubt that the boy had thought and figured for months—he had every detail of his dream flight fixed in his mind.

Somehow, the little discussion made Slim's heart a bit heavier as he walked to the hangar. He strolled along absently, and again there was a vision in his eyes. Why think of it? He, a

two-hundred-dollar-a-month mail pilot! A twenty-five-year-old kid with just two thousand dollars in the world! Nevertheless, his mind clung to the prospect. If he achieved the flight, every ambition he'd ever had would come true. He would have made a forward step in the conquest of the air—the game which had been his passion since boyhood. And there would be money and fame enough to enable him to go into the airplane business for himself, build the ships he dreamed about, show the world what possibilities there were in the air.

He'd like a chance to blaze a few new trails —Lord, he'd give his right arm for the mere opportunity to do it! And Bill Maloney and the boys, struggling along out there in San Diego for the love of the game that was in them, they'd become rich, perhaps, and famous. Then the whole bunch could get together, and together they'd solve some problems and take some chances and maybe leave a few landmarks in the march of aviation to its rightful place in the world. And his mother would be happy to see his dreams come true—quietly proud, and happy—

"Be yourself," Slim chided the dreamer in-

side of him, and forced himself to concentrate on his inspection of the big De Haviland that he was to test.

At the same moment Robinson, his whole being afire with the enthusiasm which had suddenly been born in him, was rushing downtown. Ten minutes later, he was closeted with Harry Keightly, a chubby, good-natured and rising young banker. First Keightly guffawed, then listened smilingly, and finally was leaning forward as the fiery Robinson, his keen face fairly twinkling, pounded his points home.

"Honest, Harry, if there's a man living that has the combination to make it, Slim's the man! He's lived, breathed, thought aviation since he was knee-high to a grasshopper! Know what he did? Worked with flying circuses, as a parachute jumper, just so he could pick up flying free from the pilots. He's lifted himself by his own boot-straps, I tell you! He was born for the air. Why, he enlisted in my National Guard outfit as a private, simply to be around the motors and ships he loved! I made him take the army course at Kelly Field, and he turned out a wonder—not only as a flyer, but on aerodynamics and motors and all that stuff.

He thinks it, studies it, figures it—it's his whole life, I tell you. Just destined for it!"

"Most men," Keightly agreed thoughtfully, "would have built a few air castles about this Paris flight and let it go at that. He's got everything thought out, has he?"

"Right down to his motor and how much gas he'd need!"

"But he's only a kid—"

"What of it? He isn't my chief pilot and a captain in the National Guard because he's good looking, is he? And anyway he's an old man in air experience. Why, the son-of-a-gun has made more parachute jumps, under all kinds of conditions, than some flyers have hops! He doesn't drink or smoke, is as healthy as a horse—and I'll swear he's more at home in the air than he is on the ground. He doesn't care for girls and likes to be alone, so he can putter around his ships and just soak himself in aeronautics.

"And—and—I don't know—it's hard to describe—" the major was groping for words to express an intangible something he had always felt.

"It's like this," he started again. "Some-

times, I get the feeling that he's sort of a—a man of destiny, if you get what I mean. He's been through so much, and all, that he's got a subconscious feeling that he has the air licked —and you feel it, too. Put him in a ship, and you just feel that he can do anything, get anywhere—see what I mean? He's in his own element. Sometimes when you get a look at his eyes—you have a funny feeling—"

"Oh, quit going into spasms, old man!" interrupted Keightly suddenly, and his laugh was a joyous bark. The flame of Robinson's enthusiasm had kindled a conflagration in the banker's own soul. "I'm for it—it'll be great for St. Louis, and if the kid makes it—say, I'd do a hornpipe up and down Jefferson Boulevard!"

A half-dozen flying visits to various business men, during which the enthusiasm of the pair swept aside objections as though they were flies, and Robinson was breaking speed laws on his way back to the field. Twilight was falling, and a mail plane was droning overhead as it pointed through the thickening shadows for Chicago. Lindley's tall body was discernible through the dusk, as he walked slowly toward

the office. Electric lights winked on, and in the wan light that filtered through the office windows, the two men met.

"'Lo, Chief. Why out here so late?" queried Lindley.

"Listen, son," Robinson said slowly, and suddenly the leaping fire within him fell to a warm glow. He felt, for the first time during that hectic afternoon, the real meaning of what he was going to say. "Brace yourself, Slim. I've raised twenty-five thousand dollars, which you said was enough. It's yours, boy—you're on leave, starting right now. Get your ship, get to New York, and get under way for Paris —you're the St. Louis entry for the Orteig Prize!"

"What!"

It was a savage, vibrant bark. Lindley's big body was as motionless as though it had been carved from stone. For the moment his mind was a swirling whirlpool. He strove to speak, and could not. Beneath a star-studded sky the two men were like statues, save for Lindley's hair, ruffled by the breeze.

Suddenly his body slumped weakly.

"Lord," he whispered, and then one long

arm shot out and his hand gripped Robinson's arm in five tentacles of steel.

"Chief—you're not kidding me, are you?"

"No!"

Lindley's arm dropped, and then Robinson's eyes shifted, as though he could not bear to look into the glowing ones of his pilot. Lindley, his whole being a riot of joy, nevertheless felt his mind ranging far ahead, out of his control. San Diego—New York—beneath him the vast Atlantic—

"Chief," he said slowly, "I just—can't talk now. Would you mind if I came in in a few minutes?"

"Sure, boy," nodded Robinson, and went inside.

During the next ten minutes, he glanced frequently out the window. Lindley was standing there, head thrown back and his hair tossing in the wind. It was as though he were a son of the stars, seeking strength from them, and counsel.

For a moment, the serious-minded, thoughtful young flyer felt as though the high gods of the air had reached down and touched him, commissioning him to plant their banner at the

next milestone along the path of conquest.

And then, suddenly, the blood of the Vikings whose scion he was, started surging and pounding through his veins, and it was an exultant, transfigured young adventurer who made the long-distance telephone wires sing as he talked to Bill Maloney, on the coast. And the train, next day, carried out of St. Louis a youth whose whole being was suffused with a quiet, glowing happiness. The three-day journey was at once an eternity, and yet only a moment, as he spent every hour of wakefulness in going over and over the task that lay before him.

In San Diego, Mr. William Maloney, chief designer and test pilot of the Bryan Aircraft Corporation, met him at the train. The long ride had settled the young flyer's mind, somehow, and he saw clearly the almost insurmountable obstacles that lay between him and his goal. It was Lindley who somewhat subdued the exuberance of his friend, and Lindley who insisted:

"Come on, Bill. No parties or that stuff. Let's go to bat right now!"

And go to bat they did—the young designer, the manager, and the department foremen

of the small, struggling factory which represented the faith of three young airmen, still in their twenties. There were long-drawn-out technical arguments, lasting far into the night, as inch by inch the construction of the special Bryan monoplane was gone over. Finally, it was decided that Lindley's ideas were good, with but one exception. The oversize gas tank would be switched to a position in front of the pilot, instead of behind him.

The forty craftsmen in the Bryan factory went to work. Day and night, almost, the quiet Lindley was in the factory, watching while careful hands wrought every part of the ship that was to be his own. As it took shape under his eyes, it seemed to become a part of him. He was a man of but one idea, and no dinner party in San Diego had him as a guest. He trained like an athlete preparing for a race—diet, exercise, rest, all under a rigorous régime which he had set for himself.

With every passing day, the headlines in the papers grew more plentiful as three great ships, with three world-famous pilots and navigators, prepared for the test. Over in France, the glorious French hero, Captain Nungesser, was

grooming his *White Bird* for the flight. The world was unaware that Slim Lindley, out in San Diego, was working and dreaming, too, and Lindley was glad that it was so.

The ship was practically completed when he awakened one morning to catch his breath as he read:

"Nungesser and Coli Start!"

All that day he hoped and prayed that they would make it. For the only hours since that eventful evening in St. Louis, his own task failed to interest him. And as day followed day, and the conviction strengthened that two more pioneers of the air had lost their lives in a glorious gamble, Lindley's eyes seemed to grow more brooding, and the lines to deepen on his face. To the first curious questioner who asked him:

"How do you feel about it now?" he answered simply:

"It's part of the game, of course."

Back on Long Island, the chunky yellow Ballanca monoplane was almost ready to start, and the great three-motored Fokker was commencing its last series of tests when Lindley, his hair blowing in the wind and his eyes glow-

ing like stars, came out to the Bryan field and saw his ship, ready to fly. It was a surprise—he had not expected that it would be completely assembled until the next day.

He walked over to it silently—that trim silver craft that had come to be the most important thing in his life. He touched it tentatively here and there, caressing its tubular steel fuselage and sturdy wings. Almost every man in the factory was there, and for some reason they were silent as they watched his face.

"Want to test her yourself?" Bill Maloney asked him, and Lindley nodded. Funny, but he didn't want to have any other hand but his own on the stick of the *Spirit of St. Louis.*

It was he who warmed up the two-hundred-horsepower radial engine, and listened to the song of its nine mighty cylinders as though it were the music of the gods. And it was he who exultantly lifted the monoplane from the earth for the first time, and felt it rush buoyantly through the air as though overjoyed to be free at last.

He got a grip on himself finally, and for two hours he put it through its paces.

"It'll be nose-heavy with all the gas aboard," he decided, "but not too much so. Can't get over that."

Every moment, as it played through the air like a shining silver dragonfly, he grew more confident of the wisdom of its construction. Ahead of him were the great gas tanks that would hold 425 gallons of gas. The ship would weigh 5000 pounds then. The tanks were cut away at the bottom—just enough to give space for the rudder. Five feet had been added to the span of each wing to lift the extra weight, and now the forty-six-foot wing was functioning perfectly—there was no wing-heaviness, or lack of stability. Adjustable stabilizer, periscope to give him forward vision, two small windows cut in the sides of the completely enclosed cockpit, the specially built instruments clustered conveniently in front of him—he was sampling the fruit of his years of study, and found it good. There was a space for food at his feet, and space for a life raft back in the fuselage. The small windwheel to run the generator of the earth inductor compass was set on top of the fuselage, the generator underneath it.

He sideslipped into the field to take advantage of his direct vision out of the windows alongside his head. Five feet from the ground the ship was level, and with a few brief looks through the periscope to see that all remained clear ahead, he landed it, peering at the ground through the window.

As he climbed out of the door, his eyes met Maloney's and suddenly his face was transfigured by a smile. Then:

"O.K., Bill. Now let's load her up and see."

Fifteen minutes later he was in the air again, three hundred and fifty gallons of gas in the tanks. She'd be nose-heavy—no doubt about that—

"But she'll carry the gas to get me there!" he told himself, and then exultation left him, somehow. His ship was under him now. All that mechanical ingenuity could do, had been done. Barring some break in the rhythmic roar of that thrice-tested motor in front of him, there was but one obstacle between San Diego and Paris. That was Slim Lindley. It was up to him, and him alone, now. And as his task loomed directly ahead of him, a very serious young man, with his eyes looking five thousand

miles into the distance, stepped from the cockpit and said simply:

"I'll leave tonight, I guess, so as to get to St. Louis in the morning."

He never left his ship that day, except to eat. It seemed to supply companionship more precious than that of any human being. And when, at exactly five minutes of six that night, the *Spirit of St. Louis* left the ground its pilot scarcely noticed the cheers of the crowd—cheers that had an undercurrent of deadly seriousness. A continent lay between him and the start of his real task—an annoying distance that he was impatient to span. Over on the Atlantic coast three great ships were impatient to be gone; he must be on the ground with them.

He set his course by the floating compass and the earth inductor, and as he held the needle of the inductor on zero, the time seemed to pass in a sort of dream while he communed with himself over the mission he had undertaken. Darkness fell as the silver ship flashed through the sky, five thousand feet high, and he seemed to be alone in the world. It was the feeling he loved, and somehow as the hours passed, his

whole being seemed to become placid, and his mind quieted.

Arizona glided beneath him, then New Mexico. Far ahead, he saw the Rockies looming darkly, and he sent his ship climbing steadily upward to sixteen thousand feet as it hurdled those majestic peaks. Southeastward was Santa Fe, a fairy city of gleaming light. A slice of the Panhandle of Texas, then Oklahoma —and soon after dawn had revealed the earth below him, he knew he was roaring along above Missouri. As St. Louis came into sight ahead of him, he smiled a slow smile. That solitary vigil had matured him, and he felt not at all like a daring adventurer of the air, as he slipped his ship into that familiar field and felt his hand crushed between both of the major's.

He was surprised at the crowd that had gathered, and at the front pages of the evening papers that soon littered the streets of St. Louis. And, somehow, the enthusiasm of the city that had sponsored his ship did not seem very important. His mind was centered within himself. It seemed strange that people should esteem it a great feat to have flown 1550 miles, at night, in fourteen hours and five minutes.

He smiled his bashful smile, and seemed to try to efface himself, when a ring with flying insignia, a gold horseshoe and rabbit's foot, were given him at dinner that night. He longed to be alone, as though quiet meditation would help fit him for his task.

Not even Major Robinson's entreaties that he stay over a second day to be the guest of honor at a huge dinner could move him. At eight o'clock in the morning he left, and seven hours later, as he spiraled down over Curtiss Field, his heart was bounding within him.

"We're here, old girl," were the words his lips formed as he unconsciously patted the side of his ship.

During those lonely hours in the air he had come to feel that the roar of the motor was the voice of a friend, pouring words of comfort and encouragement upon him, and that he and his ship were one.

He forgot the crowd, then, that surged below him around the hangars, as his eyes caught the sheen of silver water. He was at the rim of the Atlantic which they—he and his ship—were to try to conquer.

He still seemed to be gazing with his mind's

eye over the Atlantic when he landed. And as he tumbled from the cockpit to the deafening salvo of cheers, he was like a boy at a surprise party.

"What's the excitement?" he thought dazedly, and when it was borne in on him that the lanky stranger who had nonchalantly crossed a continent as a prelude to crossing the Atlantic was the reason for the presence and enthusiasm of ten thousand people, he was incredulous.

It was pleasant, but unimportant. As he saw his ship housed in a hangar, and then as he worked over it for a few minutes, wiping it down lovingly, the crowd behind the ropes seemed far away. Chambers and Bart Accord and Commander Fowler, world-famous airmen that they were, he greeted with shy admiration. It seemed presumptuous of him to compete with them—and then, as he showed them his ship, the trim craft made him forget his humility. It was disloyal even to think it was not up to its task—if he were up to his.

At the other airmen's invitation, he inspected the great three-motored Fokker and the chunky yellow monoplane that were being groomed to

essay the conquering of the Atlantic. But as he looked them over, and admired them, he was thinking:

"They can't beat you, old girl—they can't!"

And then, in breeches and golf stockings and sweater—the only clothes he had brought with him—he was driven to a Garden City hotel, where he went to sleep. He was tired.

The days went by, and were like so many eternities. The weather reports were uniformly adverse. It would have been madness to send his ship out into the fog and rain and sleet that blanketed the great circle northward that he had made up his mind to follow. Almost every waking hour he spent with his ship. Enthusiastic crowds swarmed the front of his hangar from dawn to midnight, but they seemed unreal—a fantastic background to his mental world. The *Spirit of St. Louis* was the focal point of that world, and to it he turned for the strength and tranquillity to survive the tension that would never end until he had gone. Sometimes, he took it into the air, to be alone with it, and to listen to its ceaseless song of courage.

Three times it seemed that he could start,

and three times he had to stay on the ground as later reports came in. The *White Bird* with its flyers had been given up for lost—and down in Virginia, the third rival of his ship had carried its flyers to death in the sea they were preparing to battle. All the while Lindley, his flyer's heart sorrowful but his spirit unafraid, communed with his ship, and sometimes his hand would rest for a long time on the cap of the propeller hub. On its underside was written:

"We're sure with you."

And every one of the dozens of men who had made it possible for him to create the ship had his name inscribed there.

It was late in the afternoon of his eighth day on Long Island when he scanned with special interest the weather report that had just been handed to him. He was leaning against his ship, and his eyes stared unseeingly at the crowd, kept away from the hangar by a long barrier of rope, and guards. Fog all the way up the coast, and overhead there was a chilly gray mass of clouds from which the rain dripped ceaselessly. And yet, in that report, there was hope. Clearing expected within

twenty-four hours, out over the Atlantic, conditions were excellent.

For many minutes he stood there, and all the time he knew what he would do. Nevertheless, he tried to think things through. It seemed that conditions would never be perfect —if the Atlantic were clear, Newfoundland would be foggy. He felt that he was being impelled, by some influence which he could not comprehend, to decide to go, that night.

Suddenly he turned to Frazier, one of the mechanics who had been put at his disposal by the Curtiss Company.

"Let's get her ready, anyhow," he said, smiling slightly. "Put in the gas, eh?"

The weather-beaten mechanic glanced at him, something of awe in his eyes.

"Yes, sir," he said, and in a moment he was busy at the drums of special high-test gasoline that Lindley, after careful tests, had ordered sent out from the coast.

The word spread like wildfire: "Lindley may leave tonight." If any of the crowd left the field that night, there were ten persons to take the place of each one who went home. Slim stayed in the hangar with his ship. The

rain seemed to be lessening slightly with every passing hour. Those weather reports might be accurate, at that. He had a hunch that he was going to leave—

"I'm going to run to the hotel, and get a little rest," he said to Frazier, abruptly. "Be back in a little while."

It was nearly midnight, and he felt that he wanted to be alone. Back in the hotel, he lay down on the bed, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. For two hours he lay there—two hours that ticked by in a sort of waking dream. He knew, somehow, that he was going to start, and as the adventure of which he had dreamed lay directly before him, there was no exultation, nor any fear. It was as though he were communing with the flyer's gods, humble before them.

At 2:30, he got to his feet slowly, and methodically drew on his woolen sweater. In golfing knickers and stockings, the sweater over a flannel shirt, and his blond hair tousled as usual, he was entering his hangar. The fog was thick, and still dripping moisture. Tightly packed thousands watched him, as he conferred briefly with his crew.

"Those afternoon weather reports will be sixteen hours old by daylight," he remarked as though talking to himself. "I think this fog is lifting, as they said—and that it'll be clear to the north."

They watched him silently. To one side, Commander Fowler watched, without saying a word. Lindley straightened, and his blue eyes shone brightly, as the hint of a smile flashed across his lips.

"Let's get her over to the runway," he said briefly.

As police cleared a line through the dense crowd to make room for the truck, there came from the crowd a low, buzzing drone. It was as though they felt it would be a sacrilege to raise their voices. Lindley himself, his eyes those of a man who is gazing at a distant vision, helped lift the tail of his ship, and fasten it there tenderly, and then, in an official car, followed the truck as it rolled slowly through the gray night.

Across the field, over the road, and on to Roosevelt it went, and there, at the head of the runway, Slim himself released the tail of the plane, and helped ease it to earth. The police

had no trouble in holding back the swarming thousands of shivering, mist-drenched onlookers.

It was nearly five o'clock when he made a last inspection of the trim craft that had come to be the center of his existence. Life raft and water purifier in place, back in the fuselage; five sandwiches and two canteens of water hung behind where his head would be! Army rations for seven days. His eyes roved from the all-metal propeller to the specially built cluster of instruments; oil pressure gauge, air speed indicator, turn and bank indicator, to tell him whether he was flying straight or turning, and a climb indicator. On the lower line, a fuel gauge, tachometer, temperature gauge, altimeter, and electric clock. His compasses were to one side.

All was ready.

"Here's the weather chart, sir."

He turned, and his aides clustered about him —Mix, of the instrument company, Hewell, government weather expert, and his mechanics. Commander Fowler, greatest of air navigators, was by his side, and Chambers, whose yellow monoplane was also loaded and ready to go,

was near by. Chambers had already decided not to attempt it that day.

Lindley's mouth was dry, his throat parched, as he studied the chart. A few pointers from Hewell, given huskily, died away into dead silence.

Suddenly Lindley's hand crumpled the chart in a vise-like grip. It was as though someone outside of himself was making the momentous decision.

"I'll go," he said simply. "Warm her up, eh, Frazier?"

He got into the back seat of a car. He did not feel like talking. The motor roared into life. For three minutes it fired rhythmically, and then Frazier turned it off.

"O.K., sir," he nodded.

It would be a few minutes yet before it was light enough to go, and those minutes Lindley spent in the rear seat of the deserted car. His hand wandered to the pocket where he had tucked a brave message of encouragement from his mother. It was a cheerful, simply-worded note, but he understood the depth of feeling behind it.

"The fog *is* lifting," he told himself, and the

almost superhuman tranquillity that had flowed into him in the past few hours kept any trace of exultation from his mind.

It was light. There was no more rain, and the fog was lifting every second. He got out, and nodded to Frazier. Again the motor roared into life—

"I wonder if she knows she'll never stop for a day and a half, this time?" Lindley thought, and people marveled at the smile that came to his face. He looked at the crowd, and dozens of bear-like grips from the men about him fairly crushed his hand.

"Good luck, boy," Accord said huskily, and Chambers, his face drawn and tense, was wordless, but in his handclasp was all the understanding of the brotherhood of the air.

Commander Fowler held his hand for five long seconds. Then:

"So long, Slim. See you in Paris!"

Lindley turned away in an agony of embarrassment. He could not say the things he wanted to say to those great-hearted sportsmen—

The ear-shattering roar of the engine died slowly to idling.

"How does she sound?" Lindley asked evenly.

"Sounds good to me," Frazier said, his voice unsteady.

"Then I might as well go," Slim found himself saying, and he was in the cockpit almost before the mechanic was out of it.

His hand eased the throttle forward as the *Spirit of St. Louis* strained against the wheel blocks, wild to be gone. His eyes swept the instruments. Gently, the throttle came back. He took a deep breath, and leaned out the open door.

"Pull the blocks," he shouted, and then:

"So long, everybody!"

The throttle went forward. Slowly, the overweighted little craft started down the ash runway. Slim was looking through his periscope, his body strained forward over the stick as though to help his comrade along.

The gallant monoplane did its mightiest. He could feel it straining beneath him, and felt that it was a living thing making a superhuman effort to do its job. The soft, rain-soaked earth clung to the wheels. Ahead of him was a gully, then telephone wires.

He rocked it, and felt it answer. He was in the air—

But only for a second. The ship dropped, and again the wheels were held in that clinging embrace. But there was no turning back. Suddenly, there leaped into his vision that half of a propeller thrust into the ground ahead of him —grim reminder of the fate of gallant men who had lost their lives here a year before, starting on the mission he had set himself.

He heaved back on the stick, and again the ship answered. It was staggering through the air, like an overburdened animal weakening under the strain. He must keep it there, or that gully ahead would turn him and his beloved craft into mangled ruins.

It seemed that the indomitable spirit flaming within him flowed through his fingers into the ship. With all his transcendent skill, he fought to keep the ship in the air. One more dip to the ground, and no power on earth could save them. The monoplane staggered drunkenly along—but above the ground.

Foot by foot, with scarcely enough flying speed even to stay level, he forced it upward. He was white, his eyes pools of tragedy, as

the telephone wires loomed ahead and above him. Then:

"You did it, you did it!" he whispered weakly, and as the wires, fairly scraping the undercarriage, slid below him, he sank back in his seat. He leveled out a bit, as though resting his ship. A mile ahead were trees. Somehow he knew they would hurdle that obstacle. The test had come, and the ship had been equal to it. He was not surprised when the slow-climbing ship cleared the trees, and the song of the motor became a hymn of triumph.

As though the gods themselves were smiling, the first ray of sun burst through the thinning clouds.

And to Slim, sitting in his snugly enclosed cockpit like a line crusader bound for conquest, it seemed that a higher power was clearing the way for him. That coast, which had been fog-bound for days, lay smiling beneath the sun as the fog fairly rolled away ahead of him. At a hundred miles an hour he winged his way along, knowing every second where he was.

Two hours later, he set his course from Scituate, on the shores of Massachusetts Bay, for Nova Scotia. That land flight had seemed

like the hops from San Diego—a mere preliminary. Now, as he got halfway across on the two-hundred-mile water jump, he gazed below him at the smiling sea. Ships were here and there—

"But there won't be any, later," he reminded himself.

Fog over Newfoundland, he'd been told. He hoped it wouldn't be too thick. Perhaps there wouldn't be any.

He was unaware of the passage of time. The figures on the clock were meaningless, as far as actual consciousness of what they indicated was concerned. Pervading his whole being was a sort of transcendent exaltation, an exaltation so great that the thought of what lay ahead of him held no terrors. The Atlantic was merely a difficult obstruction requiring greater concentration to surmount.

Land ahead—Nova Scotia. That would be Meteghan down there, if his earth inductor had not failed. It was. The time was 12:25. Again the flying was easy as he roared up the coast. Halifax, then Port Mulgrave, and the electric clock said exactly four o'clock as he pointed his ship out over the water from the tip of Nova

Scotia and sent it hurtling into the misty air that stretched ahead of him.

Now, as the cooling air chilled him and sullen water rolled beneath, his face grew more set, and his eyes held a look of deepened brooding. One more tiny interval over land—and the die would be cast. Five o'clock, six, and about seven he should sight land again—the southern tip of Newfoundland.

The mist was turning into a heavy fog that rolled in from the icy waters of the Grand Banks. Foot by foot, he was forced down, until at last the *Spirit of St. Louis* was darting along less than a thousand feet above the sullenly heaving water. His eyes held almost ceaselessly to his compass, flitting occasionally to his drift indicator.

Nearly seven o'clock—and there appeared in the eye of his periscope a dark line across the sea. He strained forward in his seat.

"Land all right," he told himself thankfully. "It must be Newfoundland."

For a moment be leaned back, relaxed. Then his body stiffened. His ship dropped lower. It was the rugged, bleak-looking coast of Newfoundland, but he must find some landmark to

set his course by. The fog was so thick he could scarcely see anything. He must find the city of St. John's, if possible. He could, perhaps, take his bearing from Cape Race, but he wanted to make sure of himself by locating the island's chief town. He swung the nose of the dripping monoplane northward, seeking about like a hound for the scent. The northeast tip of the southern extreme of the island—

Suddenly it burst into view as he flew northward, now less than five hundred feet high as the fog forced him down. There was the bay, and there the small city. Tense as a drawn wire, he circled around it briefly, getting his bearings and setting his course. Then he circled again, methodically figuring what he and his ship had done. Eleven hundred fifty miles in a few minutes less than twelve hours. A favoring wind had helped the overladen ship average a hundred miles an hour, and now it was picking up speed as its tremendous cargo lightened. From his fuel gauge he estimated that he had used gas at the rate of about twelve gallons an hour.

Eastward stretched the Atlantic—nineteen hundred miles of it—to Ireland. Again he

verified his course. The slightest deviation would mean hundred of miles off course at the other end of the flight. He had plenty of gasoline, and plenty of oil. Ahead of him, the motor was firing without a break, and below his second self, the *Spirit of St. Louis,* seemed to be straining ahead as he pointed it eastward.

His eyes were the eyes of a man in a trance, and his lips worked as his hand caressed the throttle, now at three-quarters.

"Here we go," he whispered, as they—he and his ship—hurled themselves into the fog, which blotted out the land as though Newfoundland had been wiped from the earth. Just a few feet below him, huge white-topped waves, like the teeth of a monster lying hungrily in wait for prey, leaped at the ghost-ship. He was utterly alone, save for his ship. Never had a man been so utterly alone. The fog had swallowed up the ship and the man whom the world was watching.

He never dreamed, as he hurtled along through the gradually lightening fog, that he was being borne on the hopes and prayers of three hundred and fifty million people. He did

not know that he had scarcely gone fifty miles beyond Newfoundland before the world was aware of the fact that he was out over the sea, nor that in gorgeous theatres men and women were standing in silent prayer for him. He would have been stunned at the mere idea that there was scarcely a home in the western world or a street corner in a town, where his name was not on someone's lips, and his fate close to someone's heart. He would have smiled his bashful, boyish smile and flushed with embarrassment, had he ever been told that he had gathered within himself the dreams of the world he had left behind, and that he in his silver ship was the physical symbol of what earthbound mortals of the watching world dreamed they would like to be.

He was just a flyer, taking a chance to prove what a ship and a man could do, writing another page in the history of the game he loved, and the only reward he wanted was the opportunity to march in the vanguard of the air.

Momentarily, as his motor roared its song of defiance to sea and fog, he weakened. He found himself taut and overwrought as his eyes strained into the opaque mist, and saw the

darkly brooding spot of water below him rise perilously close.

"Have I got to go through this forever!" he exploded, and it seemed that the strain of fourteen continuous hours in the air had frayed his nerves, and broken the iron control with which he held himself.

"Guess I'll climb," he decided suddenly, and the temporary nervousness was over. He was again the cool flyer, as he thrust the throttle all the way on, and sent his ship upward into a blank wall of mist.

He kept it level, and in a gradual climb, with the help of his banking and climbing indicators. His eyes were on the little bubbles almost constantly. He could not see fifteen feet in any direction. Hunched in his tiny cockpit, with the fog like a shroud about him and the open sea beneath him, he leveled out at five thousand feet, and the song of the motor, dropped into a lower key as he throttled it, was like a voice of a friend from out the limitless loneliness that was his.

A half hour later, and suddenly the silver ship hurled itself out of the fog. Above him was a darkening sky, below him a blue-gray

sea that stirred itself in long swells, like a monster, stretching. Stars winked on as the heavens darkened and the water became a white-splotched floor below him.

He wasn't hungry, but he munched a sandwich—his first food. To his dying day he will never know what that sandwich was made of.

As night fell, shortly after nine o'clock, the motor seemed to run with a smoother rhythm, and the ship, as though to reassure him, was bounding more buoyantly through the smooth, icy air. To the north of him, like ghostly rafts, great icebergs glinted in the wan starlight. Then a great, heaving sea of ice floes. And ever the twain—ship and pilot—rushed on into the night, farther and farther from possible rescue, and nearer and nearer to their goal, twenty-two hundred miles away.

Again he was unconscious of the passage of time. Flying was automatic, now, and his sustained exaltation sped the time on wings. He thought of nothing in particular. The consciousness of his goal was always with him, and yet in the background. The roar of the motor had become hypnotic, lulling his sense into a vague dreaminess.

He scarcely looked out the windows, or ahead. Occasionally he gazed down at the water patiently waiting to destroy him, but he rarely thought of what the failure of two of those cylinders ahead of him would mean. His ship would not fail—why, it couldn't! It was his own—

"A ship!" he said surprisedly, and it was almost unpleasant to come out of his trance, and realize what that single winking light meant. The knowledge that below him, a boat was plowing through the water, brought no sense of comforting safety to him. It brought not even a momentary thrill of companionship. Nothing would, now. He was alone, a demi-god winging his way through the air—and that meant the height of happiness for him.

The light dropped behind, and disappeared back of one of the growing number of white piles that sailed in stately splendor across his path.

Midnight—more than five hundred miles from shore.

"Plenty of gas, plenty of gas!" became the refrain of the Wright as he made a mental calculation from his fuel gauge.

Another light shone through the clear night. Far to the south some vessel was plowing its own lonely way across the swelling sea. Another hour passed. Time didn't exist. The sky seemed lightening, while the clouds thickened and grew larger. He was conscious of occasional puffs of wind, too, that sometimes lifted the wings of his ship.

The sky was lightening. The water became lighter as the stars went out, and the clouds seemed to turn to gray.

He looked at his clock unbelievingly.

"Gosh, it hasn't stopped, has it?" was the thought that flashed into his mind.

Had he been five or six hours more than he had thought, out over the sea?

"No, that much gas hasn't been used up—Holy Moses! What a dumb bell I am!" he told himself disgustedly. "Nights are short in this country!"

In a few minutes, he was winging along in broad daylight—and it was not yet two o'clock. But as daylight came, the clouds seemed to mass together in menacing gray piles. Now he was leaning forward, his eyes flitting from compasses to the periscope.

A huge bank of mist lay directly ahead. It would be only a mile or so to go northward, and he could get around it. His eyes on the earth inductor compass and the clock, he turned his ship and darted along on the very fringe of the cloud. He must turn the ship southward the same number of degrees, for the same length of time, to get back on his course.

As he banked around the cloud, others seemed to be closing on all sides.

"I've got to go through!" he told himself grimly, "or I won't know where I am!"

He turned southward, eyes on the compass, and a few seconds later his ship was swallowed up in the fog. And he had become a drawn, taut mechanism with narrowed eyes and bounding heart as he realized the truth. The sleet rattled against his ship like the continuous roll of musketry, and before his eyes, his wing struts were being coated with ice. A few minutes of that, and the curvature of the wing would change, his ship become unmanageable—

"I've got to dive to melt it—I can't get over!" he thought with sinking heart, and shoved the stick ahead. It would melt, per-

haps, at a lower altitude. If it didn't—he thought of himself afloat on his little life raft, and strove to blot the suggestion. Meanwhile, his ship flashed downward at almost two hundred miles an hour.

"Thank goodness for the all-metal prop!" he thought over and over again, as he darted through impenetrable blackness, the hail of the sleet against steel and wood a devil's song in his ears that almost drowned out the challenging drone of the motor. The altimeter dropped swiftly. He was white-faced and tight-lipped, and his eyes looked disaster in the face, as his ship became right wing heavy—so much so that he had to fight the stick to keep it level.

Fifteen hundred feet—a thousand. He could scarcely control the monoplane, now, and and seconds would tell the tale.

He gasped with relief—the relief of a man who has been reprieved from death, as he saw the icy coating of his ship turn to water and disappear. He was but fifty feet high, the water vague below him as what was now rain brought a million tiny geysers to its surfaces. Now he was down to twenty feet—he had to be, to see.

A few seconds later he leaned forward, hope in his eyes. There was light ahead—but even as he flashed forth from the storm, he knew that his temporary exultation had been premature. All around him were more clouds, from ten thousand feet down to the very water, and on every side. Every one of them was a deadly projectile in the artillery of the air.

So he renewed the fight—the fight that was to seem never-ending. He banked around the first cloud, eyes glued to his compass, and with motor full on, climbed at the same time. Banking and circling, striving to calculate in minutes and degrees the changes in his course in order to compensate for them when he had a chance, he inched his way upward on a tortuous course. Three times, below five thousand feet, he was forced into a few seconds of that deadly rain of sleet and snow, but each time he fought through in time.

Six thousand feet—and there loomed above him a full fifteen thousand feet high and stretching from horizon to horizon, a dense wall of black mist. He could never get over it, and again the silver ship rushed downward,

and for taut miles he skipped along, barely above the waves that flung themselves upward like wolves leaping at their prey. The rain pounded against the ship, and suddenly a great wave, twenty-five feet high, rushed like a charging monster from out of the opaque storm.

He cried out as he pulled the ship back, and as it answered, its undercarriage was wet with the creamy foam that was like teeth on the crest of the water.

Then, as a momentary surcease from the deadly strain, came an interval of a minute during which time he must decide between two things. He was in the clear, but another mass of sleet-filled mist was marching toward him. It was not so high, and he decided to go over it. With the motor roaring its loudest and the tachometer needle wobbling as the ship vibrated, he climbed desperately. Circling and ducking back, chancing a minute of sleet at a time, he worked his way upward. He handled the ship with the matchless skill that was his, as his brain almost unconsciously kept track of his deviations from the compass course which he had set.

Ten thousand feet high, he sank back, and wiped the beads of icy sweat from his lined forehead. He was above them, but miles ahead, higher ones, their tops scraping the very sky, were coming toward him.

And they never stopped. Hour after tragic hour went by, as he fought his fight. A dozen times he was forced to rush downward through the icy particles which drove against his ship in savage millions, and then almost to dodge the waves in a driving downpour of rain. Then up again, fighting for every inch of altitude, making a thousand life-and-death decisions every hour, sometimes attaining a moment's peace two miles in the air, only to see coming toward him, in ceaseless phalanxes, the army of the air. His ship thrown about in the swirling cauldrons of the winds, his body a network of nerves strained to the breaking point, sleepless and without food, he fought until he could fight no longer. Not even the blurred song of the motor that had never failed him could help him now.

"I've got to turn back—I can't make it!" he thought despairingly, as another Gargantuan cloud, that seemed to cover the sea and

the sky at once, forced him into another heart-breaking fight.

Flesh and blood could stand no more. He was through—

And then it was that the strength he had stored up through the years seemed to well up from some mysterious spirit reserve. The blood of the Vikings, who had conquered the sea a thousand years before, surged hot through his veins. In a sort of sublime madness he flung back his head, and to the great gray monsters who rolled down on the battered, dauntless ship he cried his challenge to do their worst—and fought on.

He felt a ferocious joy in the fight, now. He fairly flung his ship into the teeth of the storm gods, and it seemed that he helped to lift it on. Two hands on the stick, sometimes, to combat the winds that strove to tear it to pieces, cheating the waves that would devour him one minute, and fighting for precious altitude the next, he clung to his course. In the very middle of the Atlantic, he scarcely realized where he was or what he was doing, as he and his ship fought their great gray enemies, and beat off the billions of missiles that sought to bat-

ter them down. A thousand times the ship was almost out of control, until he gritted his teeth and brought it level in the lower rain.

It was eleven o'clock, but he did not know it, when his bloodshot eyes, peering through the periscope, for a second, before going back to the compass needle, discerned a lightening ahead. He lifted his ship over a wave, and as though to dare the sea, dropped it down again to look. A moment's respite was ahead, he decided, and then another round in the fight that would go on until he and the monoplane were battered into ruins—

He stared ahead stupidly as the plane flashed forth into smiling sunlight shining on an almost tranquil sea. There were great rollers, but they were not pricked by rain. And as far as he could see, there was not a cloud in the sky.

For a moment, he scarcely could comprehend that his fight was over. Utterly spent, he mechanically sent the ship into a climb. His dulled mind began to work. Eleven o'clock—if he was still on his course, within five hours he should see land.

For the moment, though, that thought meant

little. At five hundred feet, he leveled the ship, and munched half of a sandwich. He then threw the other half out of the window. He had no desire for food. He was so tired—

He caught himself just in time. For a minute or so, he had been flying in his sleep—asleep with his eyes wide open. He strove to combat the drowsiness that was trying to overcome him. He seemed without feeling, incapable of thought.

"Snap out of it!" he told himself suddenly, and his weary body straightened.

He looked over his instruments, and then it was that something electric seemed to course through his veins. He was on the way to Paris, already only five hours from land. The worst part of the Atlantic was conquered. All that it meant came back to him, and his dull eyes brightened and strength flowed from his mind to his body. And as his eyes rested on the motor cylinders before him, he was ashamed. The ship was no more his brain child—it was a mighty thing, much more worthy of trust than he was.

With each minute, his exultation mounted higher. An hour passed, and as he gazed

briefly through his periscope, he leaned forward.

"Land!" he cried aloud, and his heart was pumping like mad.

He had made terrific speed—must have been a strong tail wind—

"Where is it?" he asked himself in bewilderment, as that island he had seen disappeared.

He slumped back into his seat, and then the boyish smile flickered across his drawn face.

"A mirage—and I was crazy enough to believe it," he chided himself. "Wake up, Slim, wake up!"

Two hours that were meaningless chunks of time, and what he saw he knew was no mirage. There were fishing vessels ahead—he must be nearing land!

And then there assailed his suddenly superstimulated mind all the dread possibilities to which he had given no thought for hours. He had tried to remain on the course—but had he? He might be hundreds of miles from it. But there must be land, somewhere, not too far away.

Impulsively he cut the motor, and sent the ship into a steep dive. For a second he held it

in a semi-stall above one of the vessels. Vague white faces looked up at him wonderingly.

"Am I on the road to Ireland?" he yelled at the top of his voice, and then laughed at himself.

"They couldn't hear," he chuckled—an exultant chuckle as he pushed the throttle forward and the motor answered.

He knew he was close to land. He felt that he had finished the flight already. But only for a minute. As he got a grip on himself, and the cool placidity of mind that was normally his, returned to him, he realized that he was still looking over water to the horizon.

Nevertheless, his eyes barely left the periscope before him from then on, and he searched the sky line with mounting eagerness. His speed he dared not try to calculate; the storm had made that impossible. And the thought, which seemed despicable to him, still would recur:

"Suppose the motor should fail—after eighteen hours over the ocean!"

But it did not. When he actually did see land ahead, the motor seemed to lift its song into a pæan of triumph, and the ship seemed to

increase its speed as though it, too, saw that narrow black line in front of it.

It was no mirage, this time. It was land. A rocky coast.

"Ireland, by the mighty!" the young flyer told himself slowly. "Got to turn south, of course, set my course again, and it's only six hundred miles now."

And 1:30 in the afternoon. In a few moments, his last doubt was dissipated, as the outlines of the shore below him coincided exactly with Dingle Bay.

"That was lucky," he told himself. "Only a few miles off my course, with that storm. And I'm in Europe!"

Starry-eyed, the feel of victory within him, he sent his ship higher and rushed along on his nearly completed journey. The short hop to England was made, it seemed to him, in but a moment, and as he sped over the rolling, park-like terrain of Britain, he went still higher to cross the channel. He felt superstitious about that narrow strip of water, somehow.

"Just my luck to come down in that, now!" he told himself, and laughed then with an almost hysterical exuberance.

"We have won, we have won, we have won," sang the mighty little motor, minute after minute.

As darkness fell, his glowing eyes picked out Bayeaux, near the arm of the channel noted on his map as Seine Bas.

"An hour and a half more, an hour and a half more!" the motor was singing in his ears, and his body was afire.

"Pipe down, big boy, pipe down," he talked to himself. "A forced landing in the dark could cook your goose right now, as easy as the Atlantic could."

And again he was the contained flying man, his joyousness suppressed into a quiet happiness such as he had never known before.

"Now to the Seine River—can't miss it—and Paris!" he thought, and with his whole being set on that goal, the significance of it he temporarily forgot. He just must get there, that was all.

A full fifty miles from Paris, his eyes discerned the lights of it. A slim golden arrow—the Eiffel Tower—beckoned him. Tiny lights that seemed to be rockets danced like fireflies below huge lines of lights shooting up-

ward into the black sky. Rockets, and the searchlights of the aerodrome.

With his goal in sight, all he could think of was:

"If the motor should fail now!"

But it did not. He was two miles high, because he wanted plenty of gliding distance should the engine that had carried him thirty-six hundred miles without a miss fail at the end of its cruel strain. And two miles high he still was, as he peered down on the lighted field that he knew must be the Le Bourget airport. There were the lights of myriad cars, and a dense black mass that must be people, waiting.

He cut the throttle gradually, so gently that it was like a caress. The motor seemed to die thankfully, as though very tired.

And then, winging down silently through the night in graceful spirals, he strove to comprehend what that field below him meant. And he could not. A vision had come true, and all that he had yearned for would be his. His silver plane had become a dream ship that had carried him to the harbor of his heart's desire. And his eyes were wet as he patted the side of the cockpit, and said huskily:

"You did it, old girl, you did it!"

He landed smoothly, but he was in a trance. Suddenly his body went limp, and he gazed stupidly at a torrent of black figures sweeping across the field toward him. He knew, later, that twenty-five thousand frenzied people had burst all barriers to roll over him in a tidal wave of humanity.

He could not move, it seemed, save to cut the motor dead in order to have the propeller still when those people arrived. As the leaders swept up to him, he thrust his head from the cockpit, and smiled.

"Well, I made it," he found himself saying, but it was scarcely heard by a living soul, he knew.

In a daze, he felt himself lifted from the cockpit, felt himself swaying on the shoulders of a half dozen men, the center of a sea of humanity, mad with excitement. He was dropped, and he fought to keep from being trampled. A sea of faces, indistinguishable words in French battering at his ears, women in tears and men actually shouting themselves hoarse—

He was whirled about, and saw the crowd

around the ship. They were tearing at it—souvenirs—

In a trice his brain cleared, and he found himself shouting:

"The ship, the ship! Don't let them hurt it! Don't let them do that!"

But it was useless. For a second, he felt that he himself was being mangled. But he was helpless. Again he was lifted to the shoulders of strangers—

A car forced itself through the mass that was fairly hurling his tired body over a surface of hands. Smiling uncertainly he felt himself whisked into the car, and two French officers were pumping his hand as the auto sped across the field to the commandant's office.

Drawn-faced and grimy, hair falling over eyes that were burning with an almost unearthly glow, he sank into a chair. He shook a thousand hands, smiling always and then a distinguished-looking man with a shock of gray hair burst through the men about him and took the flyer's hand in both of his, greeting him most warmly.

"I'm Ambassador Merrick," he said un-

steadily, "and—Captain, you're the hero of the whole world this night!"

"Thank you, sir," Lindley said smilingly, "but that's going a little bit too far, isn't it?"

There certainly was a lot of excitement, he thought. It hadn't been such a tough flight, all in all.

A half hour later he was at the Embassy, spirited there as though by magic, safe from the tens of thousands of men and women who would have worn his tired body out with their adulation. Some hot milk, a bath—and the happiest youth in all Christendom had laid himself down to sleep in pajamas belonging to the Ambassador of the United States to France.

Gosh, but he was tired. His long legs bent slightly to fit the bed, his hair spread over the pillow, he had time to think.

"Well, I'm here. Everybody sure is marvelous to me. I'll bet Mother, and Billy and the Major and the boys get a little kick out of it. I wonder—what—they're doing now—"

The door opened slightly, but the Ambassador stopped as he saw the doubled-up figure beneath the bed clothes. Outside, a mob was

singing and cheering, but Slim was sleeping like a tired baby. The Ambassador closed the door softly.

Three minutes later a message was flashing across the Atlantic, following Slim's own previously sent message:

"Warmest congratulations. Your incomparable son has done me the honor to be my guest. He is in fine condition, and is sleeping sweetly beneath his country's roof."

For an unutterably long minute Rex Lee sat there, motionless. His hands were gripped tight on the last page, his eyes were bright. Suddenly he relaxed, and for the first time he noticed that the sun was shooting long shadows beside the train. He breathed a big sigh of relief.

"Good Lord, what a man! And he didn't even have a bum hardware store to start with!"

It was a different Rex Lee, from then on. A thousand schemes flashed through his head. He was not headed for any stuffy hardware store—not for very long, anyway. If Slim Lindley could do what he did with nothing but

his abounding courage, Rex Lee could do at least a tiny part of it.

A plan began to form itself in his busy head. He ran a strong, slim hand through his black hair and muttered to himself:

"They ought to be able to use a flying boat service out there around Los Angeles somewhere—and I ought to learn something about flying boats, too. Slim Lindley knew a whale of a lot more about overland flying than I ever thought of knowing—but I can learn.

"Now, if I could just pick up a flying boat somehow . . ."

CHAPTER II

UGLY WATERS

Rex Lee thrust his broad, good-natured face over the side of his seaplane and kept his begoggled eyes fixed on the peculiarly swirling waters of the Pacific twenty-five feet below him.

Every hour, now, Rex made a forty-mile trip between the flourishing city of El Monica, California, and Belina Island, a beautiful resort for the wealthy. And he made it in his own ship. For two months he had been flying back and forth, and the hardware store business seemed only a dim memory.

It had been hectic while it lasted. It was half a year since Don Goodhue had bid him good-by from Kelly Field; half a year since he had read that stirring yarn of the boy who flew the Atlantic. The vision of what Slim Lindley had done had stayed with Rex. More and more, as time went on and the little hardware business—a tiny store in a Los Angeles

suburb, low in stock and lower in customers—showed no inclination to prosper, he had fought along because he believed that what another had accomplished he could do. Not that Rex had any immediate desire to fly the Atlantic; but he had the desire to give every kind of aviation a thorough trial, and to learn all there was to learn about piloting a ship.

So he inveigled dealers into granting his inherited store more credit; he obtained advertising space from the local papers at unprecedentedly low rates. He gave away free to everybody who entered packets of a tremendous stock of old seeds he found in a dusty basement bin; he polished and scrubbed and dressed windows until his back revolted. He even made a model of a trimotor monoplane completely of kitchen utensils and put it in his show-window.

And gradually he built up a clientele. Four months from the time he took the store over he hired a clerk; and the same day a bustling, beknickered little man with a scraggly goatee came in and offered to buy the store!

"Back in Goshen, Indiana, where I used to live before Sarah made me come to Los

Angeles to live," declared the little man, "I owned a hardware store. I've been loafing here for ten months, and if I don't get somethin' to do soon I'll go batty. Will you take five thousand for the works?"

Rex hardly believed his ears. But before time to lock up that night the papers had been signed, a check cashed, a pair of big black cigars solemnly smoked; and Rex turned over to a very happy little man a shining store and a gaping new clerk.

Then he had cast about for that seaplane for which he had longed. Seaplanes were not plentiful—particularly secondhand seaplanes he could buy for a low enough price to leave him some operating capital. For he already had his plan in mind. Belina Island was the home of wealth; millionaires by the score lived there.

"And," chuckled Rex, "millionaires always want to be some place else—in a hurry. A seaplane service to El Monica ought to be popular with them."

Judicious inquiry proved to him that many of the residents of the island would welcome the service he had in mind. Lewis Tuttle, whose

great winter home was one of the show places of the coast, was particularly enthusiastic. Helpful, too, when Rex approached him.

"It's just what I've been wanting," exclaimed Tuttle, a big, expansive man with an ever-present grin. "And I know the chap who has just what *you* want. In fact, I've been trying all winter to persuade him to be my air-taxi, but he won't do it."

In three days, with Lewis Tuttle's powerful aid, Rex had obtained the ship—a big biplane powered with a giant Liberty engine. The ship was old but entirely serviceable, and Rex got it for thirty-five hundred dollars. Five hundred more put it into shape, and less than a week after he went out of the hardware business he became owner and operator of the Rexlee Air Taxicab Service.

For a month it went well. Rex's trip-an-hour schedule proved none too frequent, and his ship was usually loaded to capacity. He found that the short layoff had lost him none of his cunning with a joystick, and that there was mighty little fundamental difference between piloting the old familiar D.H. and his bigger, heavier sea ship.

But the second month brought slack business. The season was waning, and when the winter residents of Belina departed his traffic departed also. So, often, he flew back and forth almost all day with an empty ship—a form of business that simply ate up the small profit and barely larger operating capital he had banked.

And within the last three days Lewis Tuttle had also failed him. For Tuttle's spoiled young son, Harry, had disappeared from sight—was nowhere to be found—and the big millionaire, wild with anxiety, spent all his time on the mainland, where Harry had last been seen, searching and offering extravagant rewards.

"It's likely to be the end of the Rexlee Air Service," Rex mused gloomily this day. "You can't fly a seaplane on thin air—and I won't be able to buy much else unless I can get some more passengers to help me make good on my well-thought-out plan!"

His musing was suddenly interrupted. He could ill afford to waste gas, but his quick, army-trained eye had caught, at a little distance off course, a queer disturbance of the

water. He swerved—it might be something interesting.

At first he could not quite comprehend what was going on down there. Then he realized, and his weather-bronzed face tightened a bit with pitying interest.

A large school of tuna was swimming round and round a mass of little flying fish. The water was clogged with the smaller fish, and the tuna, some of them eight-hundred pounders, according to Rex's estimate, were keeping a solid ring around their prospective prey. Rex knew the little fish couldn't escape. A flying fish has to have a long run in the water before it launches itself into the air and sails along. When it loses momentum and drops, it drops tail first, and the moment it hits the water it uses a rapid wriggling motion of the tail to propel itself along with its body clear. Thereby it gets up speed enough to launch itself again.

The tuna, however, were making a run impossible. The frantic flying fish were milling rapidly, in ever tightening circles. When they were densely packed, the tuna started. Like wolves they flashed in, snapping to right and

left, and with every movement of their huge jaws dozens of flying fish found their way down the insatiable maws of those monsters of the sea.

With a start Rex zoomed his heavy sea-plane.

The masts of a fishing schooner were close ahead, and he had lost altitude as he had remained absorbed in the sight below. As the airship roared across the dingy vessel, Rex looked casually downward.

Suddenly his slim face tightened, and his puckered blue eyes, usually tranquil and pleasant, had a hard sheen in them. He circled his ship around to watch what was going on below on the deck of the fishing schooner—the *Helen B.* His eyes caught the name on her side, and instantly returned to the deck.

Well forward, almost in the bow, a slim man was facing a great hulk of a fellow who was backed by three others. The two leading performers seemed to be arguing bitterly, and there was something tense and strained about their half-crouched bodies. Another man, seemingly half fainting, was slumped weakly on the starboard rail. As Rex watched, he saw

this man crumple and fall motionless on the deck.

The lone sailor gestured toward the fallen body, and the next second was shaking his fist in the face of his larger antagonist. Like a streak of light, the big man's fist shot out, and the sailor hit the deck.

He was up like a rubber ball, however, just in time to avoid the leap of the bigger man. They fought furiously—and evenly. Rex's eyes were flashing with admiration for the slim chap, while he was conscious of something utterly repulsive and disquieting about the sordid scene below. That unconscious body, the filthy ship, those ragged sailormen—truly it was a tramp of the sea.

"Yea! Attaboy!" he yelled delightedly, although he himself could not hear it, as the smaller man felled his larger antagonist for the first time.

No one was paying any attention to the seaplane, it seemed—the spectators on deck were motionless, concentrated on the fight. Others of the crew came running to the scene. All over the deck the two men fought—the smaller one weaving in and out with the grace of a

panther, his blows thudding home frequently but apparently with little force. The big man —Rex was sure it was the captain—bored in continually, and when his great fists slammed home on his victim the slender fellow went down.

Never had the slim pilot seen such a desperate, savage battle. Lower and lower he came as he watched it, until he fancied he could see the twisted snarls on their faces.

Then, as the big man leaped blindly in, his wraith-like opponent sidestepped deftly. His foot shot out, and the captain hit the deck. He got up, staggering, and the other man was ready for him. Four times blows went home, and the big man went down again.

At once Rex saw three of the others get under way.

"Look out!" yelled the excited pilot, as if his champion could hear him. But his warning was not heeded. That marvelous fighter down there leaped forward like a cat. He caught up a capstan bar, and turned to meet his oncoming antagonists just in time to get in a blow at the leader. The captain, staggering dizzily, was coming forward behind his men—

and the sun flashed in blinding radiance from something in his hand.

It was a gun. Every muscle in Rex's hard body tensed as a stark tragedy stalked toward the indomitable fighter. The captain couldn't shoot immediately because his own men formed a shield but—

Apparently the lone battler suddenly saw the gun. Two of his opponents were down; two more had taken their places. One last vicious swing of the capstan bar, and he had dropped it. In a bound he was on the rail, and the next second his body was cleaving through the air in a beautiful dive. It knifed the water cleanly, leaving scarcely a ripple behind it. The gun spoke just as he hit, but Rex saw the bullet fret the water many feet from the spot where the fugitive had landed. The crew was looking over the rail and the crazed captain was waiting, gun in hand.

Rex's narrowed eyes, with that queer, cold flame in them so different from their customary tranquil light, searched the calm waters with ever growing fear. Where had that lone fighter gone? It did not seem as if a human being could stay under so long. That captain

was waiting, gun in hand, for him to appear. Who was the lithe stranger who had fought alone, and so well? Some desperate criminal? Had he been responsible for that body down there? Or had he been taking the unconscious man's part? Somehow it seemed to Rex that the latter surmise was the truth. Well, the stranger had left two more men on the deck who'd have lumps on their heads—

Once again Rex shouted with glee. The stranger came up on the other side of the vessel. He'd been swimming under water. For a full minute he swam along in an easy crawl that propelled his body through the water with effortless grace and surprising speed.

Suddenly Rex snapped from his trance, and his mind raced along swiftly. There wasn't another vessel in sight—and a thin fog was rolling in from the sea. Where could that fugitive go? He'd drown like a rat after his fight for life—unless Rex went to his rescue.

All thought of his schedule, or of the more important fact that he didn't possess money enough to buy more than one more tankful of gas unless he got some passengers, left the slender pilot's head. Nothing could worry Rex

Lee very long. In a shallow dive he sent his ship downward, circled into the wind, and dropped his pontoons on the water in a perfect landing a hundred yards ahead of the fleeing stranger. He loosened his belt and stood up in the cockpit, swaying easily to the list of the ship.

He saw frantic activity aboard the *Helen B.* They were launching a boat to overtake the fugitive.

Rex watched the swimmer's black head cleave through the easy swells and waited tensely. In a little while that black head was close to the ship, and ten yards out a long, thin, mahogany-colored face lifted from the water, and threw a thin-lipped grin at the waiting pilot. A few seconds later, two sinewy hands were lifting the body behind them over the cowling of the cockpit. Rex helped haul the man in, and just as he did so saw that the boat, manned by three oarsmen, was starting toward them.

The man took a few seconds to get his breath, and Rex jazzed the throttle briefly to clean out the motor as he looked the stranger over. The man's eyes were narrow, level slits of light in

his boy face, under eyebrows as straight as though drawn with a ruler. His aquiline nose swept boldly forward above a long, square chin. His mouth was thin and wide and strong. His soaked black hair lay sleek and flat on his narrow head, and his body was like a piece of whipcord as the stringy muscles rippled with every movement beneath his wet shirt and trousers. He looked like one who feared neither man nor devil.

"Thanks," he said tersely when he had got his breath. "Take me to El Monica, please—right now!"

"Not so fast," warned Rex, wondering why the man's face should be vaguely familiar to him. "Why shouldn't I turn you back to the captain? That was mutiny I saw—"

"Sure it was. But you're going to take me to El Monica—right now!"

As he spoke it seemed that his eyes almost closed, and there was a slight tension in his muscles. His thin, flat cheeks seemed to sink into deeper hollows as his mouth tightened. The boat from the *Helen B.* was coming at a great rate—not more than a hundred yards from them now—

"Listen, mister. Don't try to order me around," Rex told him evenly. "I saw the fight. If you're O.K. I'll see that you get away —as far as the police ashore, anyway, because I know what they'll do to you back on the *Helen B.* So come clean, big boy, if you expect me to move a finger!"

For a second the stranger glared down at him. He seemed about to spring on the sturdily built pilot. "Rough stuff won't do you any good," warned Rex. "That won't make me fly you, and what'll you do—"

"Fly her myself!" barked the stranger, and he catapulted the three feet between himself and Rex.

But that quiet, competent young man was ready for him. His arms raised like a flash, and a straight left found its mark on that bony jaw. In a second Rex had him pinned in the seat beside the pilot's.

"Talk, darn you, if you want to get away from here. You've got just about three seconds—"

"All right!" the stranger said, with a sudden icy calm. "But, man, taxi out a ways, anyhow, before those gorillas get here!"

Which Rex did, keeping a wary eye on his companion. His mind was very busy—and he was uncomfortable. More and more it seemed that the man was afraid of something—making a desperate effort to escape from a fate he dreaded.

The roar of the motor died after the boat had skimmed five hundred yards along the water, followed by the curses of the enraged sailors. They were still maintaining the chase.

"Now talk!" ordered Rex, and there was business in his voice.

Suddenly the stranger smiled slightly, his eyes meeting Rex's fearlessly.

"I like the cut of your jib," he said calmly. "So I will talk. I hate to, though, and if you open your mouth too soon I'll break you in two!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Rex stated. "Can that stuff, mister. I can tend to myself, and who or what you are or what you think you can do cuts no ice with me!"

The stranger threw back his head, and a rollicking laugh, as if he had been relieved of a burden, came from his throat with startling ef-

fect. Seemed to change him from a grim, bold adventurer into a human being—

"Well, I'm Norwood—Jack Norwood—used to be a flyer myself in the war."

He glanced from the oncoming boat into Rex's eyes, as if expecting that his name would be recognized.

And it was. Rex, startled, looked him over carefully, and knew that he had spoken the truth. He'd seen that face in the newspapers. Jack Norwood had been an ace in the war, and following that had roamed around the world and written about his travels. Fiction, travel books, articles—his facile pen had made him famous. Rex remembered, now, having heard that Norwood was in California doing some movie work.

"I get you," he said briefly. "Thought I'd seen your face. Well, what's the lay?"

"I hit a man pretty hard back there," Norwood said calmly, "but that isn't important right now. The main thing is that the ship's an infernal hole. I was on it to get some local color stuff for a book I'm doing. An eighteen-year-old boy's aboard—fresh, sort of—and just before you came along the captain beat him

badly. I took his part when I found out—that's what you saw. And I may have killed a man doing it, as well as let myself in for trial for mutiny and a few other things. The important thing now, though, is to get the coast guard or somebody out here and get that kid—if he's still alive. I'm sure he was shanghaied aboard—maybe going to be held for ransom. I just found out that he's Harry Tuttle, whose father is offering a five-thousand-dollar reward for information about him."

"What!" yelped Rex, for once startled out of his composure.

"None other. And I'm going to beat the country with a signed story over the A.P. wires, and get money enough to fight my own case if I have to. Are you with me?"

"Let 'er go!" yelled Rex, and gave his ship the gun.

The pursuing boat stopped as the seaplane cleaved through the water. Big and heavy, it took nearly a quarter mile's run to get it off. Finally Rex rocked it out of the water and set sail for El Monica. He thought briefly of the fact that he was broke. But he dismissed that from his mind as he strained forward in his

seat as if to help the plane along. He always got by some way. Life was too short to worry!

A thin fog was now enveloping the bay, and it was hard to see. A few hundred yards to the right he saw a whale blow—the waters swarmed with the huge monsters at this time of year.

He knew the location of the nearest coast guard station, and with practiced hand he flew a bee line for it. He didn't know what law of sea or land applied to this case—but he knew what bluff old Cap'n Greenway would be bound to say.

In fifteen minutes he was taxiing toward the shore and the coast guard station. He stripped off his shoes, and he and Norwood swam and waded to shore, leaving the big twelve-cylinder Liberty idling. They knew that the *Helen B.* would be streaking for the open sea, now, and unless they beat the fog the boy would not be found for months, maybe—

In a few terse sentences Rex told the story to Greenway. Norwood stood by with preternatural calm.

"I'll take you in my boat—then we can beat the fog, maybe," finished Rex eagerly, and the

weather-beaten old government man let out a roar.

"Get 'im—I'll say we'll get 'im!" he announced in bull-like tones, and three minutes later five husky coast guardsmen were aboard the seaplane, and Norwood sat beside Rex, the others in the seats behind.

With the great Liberty turning up its limit, and flying just above the sea, Rex raced the fog. One could still see for a mile or so, but it was thickening all the time. The *Helen B.* would be like a needle in a haystack within an hour if the fog kept blowing in, as it had been for some time.

Soon they picked her up, a mile ahead of them. Rex had instinctively flown straight for her—no mean feat out over the sea. Catching up with her, he saw the sailors lining the rails, and circled low to give them a look at the uniforms of the guardsmen. Greenway stood up, and signaled the ship to stop. Slowly it hove to. A minute later, flying carefully, Rex had landed his seaplane close to it. He cut the motor dead.

"Put off a boat!" roared Greenway.

"Why?" bellowed the captain of the *Helen*

B. He was a huge figure of a man, with a flushed, beefy face and small eyes.

"You'll see! Come and get us, I tell yuh!" bellowed Greenway. And the captain obeyed.

Rex, perforce, stayed with his ship, and Norwood with him to save possible complications. Rex would have given an arm to go aboard, though. He watched the scene on the boat—expostulations, arguments—it seemed as though they'd come to blows. Then the guardsmen disappeared down a companionway, and the airmen waited tensely to see what they would find. Was the boy dead? Would the famous Norwood have to stand trial for murder and mutiny? All sorts of possibilities were there—

Then Greenway appeared on deck, carrying a limp body in his burly arms.

"I thought so," murmured Norwood, and then added: "They're bringing Captain Lutz aboard and leaving some men to bring the ship in!"

Only one of the coast guard accompanied Greenway, the captain, and the unconscious youngster. As they got aboard the seaplane, Captain Lutz's face was like a thundercloud, and his small eyes darted here and there like a

trapped rat's. Never in his life, though, had Rex seen such hatred as was betrayed in the eyes of Norwood and the captain as they gazed at each other.

"Make speed, son," boomed Greenway. "This kid's alive, but he's in bad shape. Head half stove in. The doctor's got to work on him quick, believe me!"

It was the work of a minute to get under way, and soon Rex, with Norwood beside him, was sending his plane hurtling along through the thickening haze, barely ten feet above the water. The Liberty roared along wide open, and the dizzying speed so close to the long swells gave them a hypnotic effect if one watched them too steadily.

Rex was flying by the compass alone—he could see scarcely half a mile ahead, and then but dimly.

Suddenly he leaped forward, his eyes trying to probe through the mist. The water was one mass of swirling foam dead ahead, as if some commotion in the depths were turning the ocean into a cauldron. Norwood leaned over and wiped off his goggles for him. In a second Rex was sending his plane climbing. Ahead in that

mass of white water were five Gargantuan shapes—whales. And their horizontal tails were beating the water as they twisted and turned as if fighting some unseen enemy—

A bit closer, and the water was red with blood. And in and out among the great leviathans of the sea, fighting desperately but helplessly, at least two dozen small, black and white killer whales were flashing like fleshy arrows of death.

It was a horrible, sickening, and yet terrifyingly majestic sight. The killers, according to the stories old fishermen had told Rex, were wont to rip and tear at the great whales' lips and mouths. Some old salts even said the killers bit at the great whales' tongues, because whales swim with their mouths open, acting as dredges to catch smaller fish in their path.

The Orcas were unbelievably fast and savage, and as the whales' flukes and tails beat the water into a veritable maelstrom of red and white foam it seemed that there were killers everywhere, darting in and out like streaks of light, always with ghastly effect. The sea was crimson for yards around as the battle raged.

Directly over the battle Rex's heart leaped

to his mouth. In a second he had forgotten great whales, Orcas, everything but his motor. It was sputtering, hesitating, missing. He jazzed the throttle, without effect. He reached over and turned off one switch of the double ignition motor. The motor died entirely!

In a flash he turned it on again, as his practiced eyes saw that the tachometer indicated only eleven hundred revolutions a minute. Then he turned off the other switch, and the motor still continued to sputter along on eight of nine cylinders.

He knew the explanation—the probable one, at least. A Liberty had double ignition for safety's sake—two sets of spark plugs for each cylinder. Consequently there are two distributor heads, one on each bank of cylinders. One ignition system was dead—probably the distributor head had come unfastened, and the revolving metal brush that relayed the spark to each cylinder from the batteries was out of contact. And a couple of spark plugs on the good set weren't working—dirty or something.

He glanced behind him. The titanic battle was still raging, a few hundred yards away. With every second the unused spark plugs were

becoming more and more fouled with oil—speed was necessary from every angle. The ship could scarcely fly as it was, and if it weren't doctored quickly new plugs would be necessary.

He cut the motor, which was barely powerful enough to keep the ship staggering along in the air, and glided to the water.

"I think I know what it is—I'll have her fixed" he yelled to Norwood, and that saturnine gentleman proved he was also a mechanic by yelling briefly:

"Distributor head!"

Rex climbed out of the front cockpit, and back behind the wing. In a moment he was up by the motor, set just beneath the upper wing. There was no distributor head on the right bank of cylinders. For a second his heart sank. Had it fallen off when the clamps gave way, and so been lost? If so they'd have to taxi slowly in—and that white-faced youngster down there—

Then Greenway handed it up to him. It had fallen inside the passenger compartment in the rear.

Rex, working like mad, got safety wire from the tool kit and started in. It was an awkward

position, hanging there and trying to wire on that head. As soon as he placed it in position, the sputtering motor cut in with a sweet firing rhythm once more.

The fog was now thickening very rapidly. As he strove to work as speedily as he could, it seemed that his fingers were all thumbs. The wire slipped off—everything went wrong.

"They're comin' this way!"

It was a wild roar from Captain Greenway, and Rex turned his head. What he saw paralyzed him, for the moment. He was incapable of movement of any kind as his body was held in the grip of frozen horror.

The attacked whales were fleeing madly, and they were coming toward the ship. Their backs, like black mountains, were the most terrible things Rex had ever seen as they came through the water at tremendous speed. The ship would be smashed to smithereens without even slowing up that panic-stricken flight.

Then it seemed that a total calm descended on him. Rarely did the imperturbable young flying veteran lose his composure—and now he was like an uninterested spectator. Why didn't Norwood start the ship? Or couldn't he see

what impended, from his seat 'way forward?

His fingers steady and skillful as he forced them to work slowly, he adjusted the distributor head. He gave a half sob of relief as he saw that the whales were stopping to give battle again to a horde of Orcas which were eating them alive. A hundred yards away from the ship the battle started again, and the seaplane was almost swamped.

Rex dropped down among the white-faced passengers, and started for the pilot's cockpit. At that moment it seemed that a black mountain was rising from the seething sea, a few yards back of the ship. The seaplane nearly swamped as a great whale came to the surface, its flukes working frenziedly and a half dozen deadly Orcas on its trail. One whale had come farther than its mates—

A huge, horizontal tail descended and just tipped the tail surfaces of the ship. As though a great axe had been used by a giant, one of the elevators was mashed and the other crippled.

Rex came to himself as the seaplane, under Norwood's guidance, taxied like mad out of the battle zone. But it had no elevators—and

at any moment the whales might come on again.

Rex literally fell into the cockpit.

"No elevators!" he bawled. "I'll go back on the tail—you try to fly her!"

Norwood's hawklike face was set, his lips curved in a fierce smile, and his eyes were flashing with what appeared to be grim delight. Evidently it was a situation after the adventurer's own heart—he was having the time of his life!

Soon Rex was clinging to the fuselage, back by the tail. Then Norwood took off.

As he started rocking her out of the water, Rex found he was too far back. The instinct of the born flyer told him that the tail was dragging. He inched forward, and soon the ship left the water.

Norwood looked back at him, and nodded. Evidently the ship was flying all right, and Rex was in the right spot to balance it.

He clung on for dear life as the plane hurtled through the almost opaque fog. At any second a ship might loom ahead, and they were but ten feet high, driving like a comet into a blank wall. And they could neither dive nor zoom

quickly—Rex would have to change position.

Ten, fifteen minutes—where were they, and where was the shore? For a minute Rex was panic-stricken. Had Norwood flown in a circle? Were they circling blindly over the sea? Surely he'd use the compass—

Then something long and dark loomed a few yards ahead. Quick as light Norwood cut the gun, and the ship fairly whistled through the air. Rex inched forward—the nose was dropping. They were going too fast. At the last second Rex slipped all the way back, to get the tail down, just as the pontoons struck the water two feet from the shore. With a rending crash the plane smashed into the side of a dock—and Rex's last conscious thought was that a miracle had happened—they'd hit the shore not a hundred yards from the coast guard station.

It was two hours before he came to. It had been a very, very nasty knock he'd taken when he had been hurled from his perch as from a catapult. He was in a hospital, in a private room, and Norwood was there looking down at him, in company with a doctor and a nurse.

"Hello. Good morning!" grinned the jeer-

ing adventurer. "Glad to see you're up. How does the head feel?"

"As though a triphammer were playing a tattoo on it," confessed Rex weakly.

He remembered now. His ship was smashed—

"Good news, my boy, good news," Norwood told him as the doctor and nurse stepped outside. "You and I and the coast guard divide the reward, and you get half of a cool thousand I get for rushing on to the streets an extra of the *El Monica Press* that scooped the town, and a story for the A. P. that's going all over the country."

Rex's heart bounded, and then he tried to think the matter over calmly. Yes, he deserved half of any proceeds there were.

"Furthermore, old man Tuttle's the happiest bird on earth, and Mrs. Tuttle cried four pailfuls of happy tears right in this hospital. The boy's all right. Your ship's smashed, and old man Tuttle says he'll buy you the finest flying ship between here and Paris, France—if you want it. But he says he'd rather invest the money for you in his company, and get you a job with the forest patrol service up the

coast, Oregon-way. And believe me, boy, if you want to learn about flying, there's the place. I did it, one summer—I know."

Rex considered that, and a glow went through his veins. Ride the air currents high above the precipitous, wooded slopes of the great Northwest—do his bit in saving millions of dollars' worth of the finest timber in the world! That was an alluring prospect, and Rex decided on the spot that—when he got his strength back—he would do it. But there was Norwood.

"How—about yourself?" he asked weakly, his eyes glowing with happiness as haunting worry left him.

"All fine. Harry Tuttle wasn't shanghaied or kidnapped—he ran away. And it turned out that his injury was not due to a beating exactly—he was a fresh kid, spoiled and all that, and Lutz did hit him 'way too hard for a kid. I didn't see the fight until it was over, you understand. But that's what the kid said himself. And he hit his head and broke an arm, when Lutz knocked him right down a ladder —open hatch. So nobody's going to make a complaint against Lutz, and he's not going to make a complaint against me, and that's that.

He's not such a demon as I thought. Just a hard-boiled egg with a hard-boiled crew. Well, old man—say, by the way, what's your name?"

"Lee," grinned Rex.

"Glad to know you. I'm leaving for Frisco in three hours, and then I'll grab a ship on my way to the Philippines. I'm temporarily rich; so I might as well go while the going's good. You'll be out by to-morrow. So long, old-timer."

He threw a flashing smile from the doorway, and disappeared on his way to somewhere. He was always on his way somewhere.

And Rex fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRE RANGER OF THE SKY

Two miles above the earth, a mere spot in the cloudless, sun-drenched air, an airplane was roaring its way across the trackless wilderness below. Rex Lee, temporary forest patrolman, was leaning forward, his thin face showing lines of strain and his eyes, sunk back in his head from weariness, glittering a bit with nervous tension. Unceasingly they swept the scene of wild grandeur below him, but there was no appreciation of the breath-taking scene in his mind.

It was enough to make any pilot catch his breath and spend most of his time worrying. Rock crags lifted their heads like fingers pointing to the sky, and jagged cliffs fell away to the trees at their bases. The forest was thick and seemingly limitless, and in all the thousands of acres which the young pilot could see from his lonesome perch high above an apparently deserted world there was only one cleared

field. In five more minutes that field would be out of gliding distance, in case of motor trouble.

Being an air ranger, though, Rex had become accustomed to gambling his life against the sturdy eight-cylinder motor which drummed along in front of him. It was not the possibility of crashing his plane into those towering trees below that had made his lean cheeks sunken, and cut deep lines around his set mouth. He constantly shifted his eyes to his instruments —oil pressure, air pressure, temperature, and the tachometer which told him how much his motor was turning up—but most of the time he flew automatically, without conscious skill, as he surveyed the forest below through high-powered glasses which the propeller blast seemed always about to tear from his hand.

Suddenly a savage exclamation dropped from his lips as he saw what a man was doing down next to the shack which was the only habitation in sight. It was at the edge of that one cleared field. The man was tending a small fire—burning refuse of some kind. And he was disobeying the absolute orders of the forest patrol.

"Time to teach these squatters a lesson," stormed the overwrought pilot.

After weeks of flying from dawn until dark, like all the little band of forest rangers, Rex Lee was ready to drop in his tracks. When he had accepted Lewis Tuttle's offer to get him into the corps, he hadn't had a thought of the work it involved. Danger—yes, he had expected that. Long hours, bum ships, eye-burning smoke, untiring vigilance, unthanked devotion—all these he had not foreseen.

But he wouldn't for a minute have traded places with the pilot in the softest job in Christendom. Maybe he was dog-tired; maybe he did long for an extra half-day's rest now and then. Still, he was here for a mighty serious purpose—he was here to watch these forests! He was learning things about flying that months of practice on so comparatively safe a field as the Pacific Ocean between Belina and El Monica would never have taught him. He was doing a man's job now, and he gloried in it. With a small band of kindred souls—fellows who, like him, had volunteered to help save the wealth of a nation—he was willing to fly until he keeled.

So the smallest smoke plume looked bigger than a mountain to him, and a pin-point spark

seemed to loom up like a blast of dynamite. That was why he saw that tiny fire down there far below him, and why he swore softly as he saw it. Any one of those sparks might set fire to a hundred thousand acres of the virgin forest he had come to love so well. The drouth this summer was burning up the whole western slope—the woods were dry as tinder.

Truly the time had come to teach those ignorant, obstinate mountain people a lesson. As he sent his plane spiraling downward like some gigantic monster of the air Rex, with every nerve jumping, was thinking:

"They live off here shut away in a world of their own. Don't know a thing about law or government—they're willing to take a chance on burning up themselves and those trees and the towns on the other side, maybe. Well, we've bothered enough with 'em!"

To Rex such utter disregard for their welfare as was being displayed by the man below was absolutely incomprehensible. To the flyer, the preservation of the few remaining forests was almost a religion. Well he knew that only one-sixth of the woodland of the whole United States was left—millions of acres of blackened

wastes were horrible scars from wounds which were the result of just such carelessness as that below. Profiteering lumbermen and careless criminals—that's what they were—had robbed the country of its birthright. The time had come to make these mountain squatters recognize the law of their country and fear to break it.

The field was large enough to land in. With throttled motor he stalled into the field, and turned his ship for the take-off. The mountaineer was standing by his fire, as though petrified with astonishment. Then, as the tall, slender young pilot leaped out of his still idling ship and ran toward him, the gaunt squatter started to put out his fire. He had been burning odds and ends of refuse.

"You're coming along with me!" snapped Rex quickly.

"Every one of you squatters got your orders—not a speck of fire until rain comes! Come on!"

"Huh?" grunted the bony, gaunt young fellow, his dull eyes gleaming a bit.

"You heard me. You're going to jail for starting this fire against orders!"

The man was unarmed. Rex leaped in and stamped out the fire, and then ordered his stupefied captive to help him throw dirt on it. This they did with planks.

"Come on—get in that plane!"

"I ain't goin'!" shouted the mountaineer, cowering back. "I ain't—"

There was no time to waste. Gas was being used all the time, and Rex realized immediately that it would be an impossible task to get the man into the plane of his own free will. He looked to be of the mentality of a small child.

The ranger did the only thing possible. He walked up to the unkempt woodsman slowly, talking in calm, reassuring tones and then, when he got close to him, set his wiry body for the blow. The next second his fist leaped out with the speed of a striking rattler, and a terrific blow on the jaw sent the mountaineer down, unconscious. Rex picked him up and staggered over to the ship with him. In a few seconds, he was strapped in the seat, and his hands were tied with wire. Rex knew that the news would be all over the mountains in a day or two—and that nothing would strike such terror into the hearts of the semi-barbarous squatters as the

fact that one of their number had gone as a captive into the unknown, much-dreaded outside world.

Maybe that would teach them to obey the orders they were too ignorant to appreciate the value of—

Then he saw a bearded man run into the clearing. He was of a tall, straight build and although he seemed to be at least fifty years old his thin face and small head were covered with a growth of fiery red hair. In one glance he seemed to take in the significance of the scene.

"This man started a fire, against our regulation, and he's under arrest!" Rex shouted as the man ran toward him.

There was a light in the oncomer's eyes that had something of madness in it, the pilot realized swiftly. Acquainted with the turbulent passions of such men as these, Rex waited not on the order of his going. In a second he was in the cockpit, and above the whisper of the idling motor he could hear the man screaming as he ran.

Rex looked around as he jazzed the throttle to clear out the motor. The man was only fifteen feet from the plane, now, and his convulsed

face was the setting for wildly flashing eyes that were concentrated on the plane. Just a second or two before the man reached the ship, Rex sensed what was on his mind. It was to smash the tail-surfaces of the ship. The forest patrol had made the mountaineers cognizant of some of the details of a ship, and the old man, the pilot thought, knew enough to realize he could cripple the ship.

The motor sprang into full cry. Just in time, as it got under way, Rex jammed on the rudder and the tail swerved from the old man's foot. He lost his balance as the terrific kick met only thin air, and before he recovered the ship was gathering headway swiftly, and was out of danger. But it had been a very narrow squeak.

As the tense pilot circled the field to gather altitude before crossing the peaks to the little emergency field he could see the old man standing below, his clenched fists raised to heaven, as though vowing revenge while he cursed the aerial messenger from the outside world who had stolen one of his own people—for reasons Rex realized, that possibly that lonely figure could not understand. There was a gleam of

pity in the pilot's eyes as he took a last look downward—but there could be no compromise.

A half hour later the ship hurtled over the last peak, and the temporary canvas hangars rimming a large pasture lot on the edge of the little town of Sorrento came in sight. Only one ship was visible—the rest were out on patrol.

The utterly weary pilot landed as the sun was setting. High in the sky another plane was coming home. Mathews, the squat, dark-faced, sardonic pilot in charge of the little emergency group, met him and listened to the story calmly.

"You did right. Two fires started over east to-day—got fifty men in an hour and put it out. Give one of those blazes two hours, and a hundred thousand acres'll be a living furnace! Hope the red-head doesn't start something to pay you back!"

Mathews, who had spent five hours in the air that day—Rex had had six—took the sullen, frightened captive into Sorrento. While he was gone, Rex, having washed out of a basin in his tiny tent, came to the door as he heard a strange voice talking to Hartwig, one of the other pilots. There were six in all—Unger and

Thomas had been killed three days before.

"Meet Lee, one of our flyers," Hartwig introduced them, and Rex shook hands with a short, thin, white-faced little fellow with snapping black eyes and a nervous manner.

"Cary was a flying cadet during the war—armistice came along just before he was due for a commission—and he wants to join up and help without pay," Hartwig said slowly. His face was still grimy with oil, and he looked ready to drop. "You realize, Cary, that a few weeks ago the state legislature jammed an emergency measure through, appropriating a few thousand dollars for an airplane patrol of these woods while the fire danger is so great. The Lavido fire—you know what that was.

"And so a few of us volunteered, and collected in rush time the only planes we could get—you see 'em. Junky training planes, bought from civilians, and most of 'em are ready to fall apart. We've only got two mechanics—and we have to fly these mountains all day long in ships that wouldn't be pretty to handle in flying right over a field. We haven't got half enough pilots, we don't get money enough to feed ourselves, and you'd better

think twice before you throw in. There isn't money enough in the world to pay a man for flying these superannuated crates over this country."

"It happens that every man realizes the aching need of saving these woods," Rex cut in. "Maybe some day people will come to their senses—but if we don't put up a scrap right now, there will be precious few trees left standing in the country."

"I know all that," Cary said rapidly, stuttering a bit in his eagerness. "I-I'd give anything to throw in with you—"

"That's the boy," Rex said quietly, and his tired eyes lightened a minute. "If your papers are all right, I guess Mathews'll be glad to have you. We have to fly alone now—you can be an observer, anyway. Can you work radio?"

"I've forgotten most of it," confessed Cary, "but I could fly in case of a fire, while one of you directed it."

That was the way it worked out. His papers were all right, and a check flight with Rex showed that Cary, although a poor flyer, constantly over-controlling, could be used to fly a plane while one of the experienced men worked

the radio in directing the thousands of fire fighters who, in an emergency, would be under the control of the plane.

How could anyone there know that Cary would not have received his commission had the armistice never come? Rex was soon to find out why.

The next two days were nightmares of unremitting toil. The ranger's ears rang day and night, as a result of the hours of belaboring which a wide-open motor gave them. Day in and day out, from five to seven hours a day he and the others flew their rickety planes over that deadly country. If only the good planes would come, it would ease the strain. However, they did not come and would not for many days; so the half dozen servants of a hundred million people, actuated by an inarticulate love for their country and a savage revulsion against the heedlessness which was gutting it of its natural resources, fought their lonely fight.

Quiet, steady-nerved Mathews lost. He did not come back that second afternoon, and an hour later the searching planes found him, unconscious in the wreck of his plane. It was al-

most hidden by the woods. The pilot would be crippled, certainly. Perhaps he was dead. No one would know, Rex reflected wearily, until the relief party ordered from Hoover City found him, as a result of radio directions. That left Rex, second in command, in full charge of the flight.

And a man's-size job it was. Not a man was himself. Their condition made molehills seem mountains, and minor disagreements seem cause for battle. Cary, especially, was in bad shape. While all the pilots were on edge, the new man could not stay quiet for a moment. His thin, eager face twitched constantly.

At nine o'clock Rex left the group in front of Mason's tent, and tried to sleep. A few minutes later he heard Cary's high-pitched voice. Mason's deep tones came next, a queer rasp in them. He had been Mathews' dearest friend. He wasn't himself to-night—

Then Rex heard Cary again, yelling something in hysterical fury, and there came the noise of a scuffle. Rex leaped to his feet, and ran out through the darkness. He could see two struggling forms. The rest of the pilots were trying to separate them.

"Cut it out!" yelled the young flight commander, and Mason, coming to himself, dropped his hands obediently.

Cary, however, broke loose from Young, who was holding him, and tore into Mason. Rex reached him just in time to make a football tackle and drop him to the ground.

"Be yourself!" snapped Rex, his face old and bleak for a twenty-three-year-old pilot.

"Who are you? I'll do as I blamed please —take that!"

Cary's last vestige of self-control had left him. He leaped at Rex like an unleashed tiger. The other flyers closed in, and shortly he was held, writhing wildly, in the grip of Rex, Mason and Young. For a second he struggled, and Rex, striving to be calm when every nerve fibre in him seemed to be on fire, said sharply:

"Don't be a fool! What do you think you're doing? Cut that stuff, or I'll—"

Suddenly the captive stopped struggling, and great sobs shook his slender frame. There was a sudden silence—only the sound of gasping sobs was audible through the night, undertoned by the whisper of the leaves in the near-by woods.

"Let him go, fellows," said Rex quietly, and led Cary toward his tent.

"That's all right, old man," he said quietly. "We're all pretty bad—worrying about Matty lying out there in the woods and all. You'll be all right. Just—"

"Oh, shut up!" flared Cary and he tore loose from Rex's arm. He darted toward his tent, and disappeared.

Suddenly it seemed to Rex as though a great, icy calm descended on him. He had heard of outfits in the trenches going mad, all of a sudden, and of prospectors, caught out in the wilds for months, turning into beasts. It was up to him to see that the boys, overworked and overstrained as they were, did not go berserk.

"What brought it on?" he asked Mason.

"We were talking about the time a cadet froze the controls on Matty, when he was an instructor at Donovan Field, and how Matt was too soft-hearted to can this boy for it. Same fellow got scared again and did the same thing, and nearly killed Matt."

"George said any cadet who froze the controls a second time was pretty close to a murderer," the tall gangling Young put in. "Said

he ought to get out the first time, and not wait to be kicked out."

"I'm sorry I fought the kid," Mason said in his deliberate way. Apparently he had come to himself. "Maybe he froze on some flyer himself—he's nervous enough."

"Fellows, we've got to watch our steps," Rex told them quietly. "I know how we all feel; I could lick a man for looking at me, right now. We've got to quit being kids on that stuff, though, and run ourselves right."

He went on talking for a little while, and the other flyers, suddenly brought to a realization of how bitter and acrimonious the evening had been, listened silently. They were a more mature, closer-knit group as they went to their tents. It seemed that the tanned young pilots of a few weeks ago had been suddenly changed into men.

Rex fell on his bed like a dead man. He thought of a thousand things: the world outside, Mathews lying over there in the woods, Cary, and whatever ailed him.

He fell into a troubled sleep, broken by nightmares. It seemed that great fires were sweeping through his beloved woods—

Suddenly he was wide awake, his body tense on the cot. The tent was black as pitch. Every sense alert, he listened. There was a slight rustle outside the tent—then silence.

Then the flap of the tent opened a bit wider, and in the V of light a tall, gaunt figure was framed against the lighter background of the starlit darkness without. It was the red-haired mountaineer, stooping to get in, and treading across the tent like a cat.

For a second Rex lay there in fascinated horror. It seemed that those eyes were gleaming like a cat's in the dark—

Then a cry, which was not loud because it could hardly tear itself from his throat, burst from him, and as the man leaped forward the flyer threw his body off the bed. The next instant they were locked in a deadly struggle, the mountaineer's long fingers ever reaching for the slender, steel-muscled flyer's neck.

Rex fought with the strength of utter desperation. For less than a quarter of a minute the combat lasted, and then the old man tore himself loose, and bounded through the door. It was a few seconds before Rex, half strangled, could stagger to his feet and run out, yelling

as he ran. Over in front of the canvas hangars he could make out the form of a horse. As George Mason tumbled out of his tent, and others called out to know what was the matter, the panting Lee saw the old man fling himself on the horse and gallop towards the woods. In a few seconds he had disappeared in the black depths of the forest.

"Great Heavens, look!" shouted the huge Mason, his voice echoing wildly through the night. A red glow was rising from the end hangar, and then a tongue of flame seemed to run like lightning up the side.

"Get the others!" gasped Rex, and in his bare feet he ran toward the hangar. There was gasoline or something on the canvas to make it burn so—

The side of the tent was almost a mass of flame. He must get the ship—that all-valuable ship which couldn't be spared. And the others must be taken from their hangars before the flames spread—

He plunged in the door as the voices of the others were audible behind him. A terrific blast of heat almost withered him, and the thick smoke was filling his lungs and strangling

him as he plunged blindly toward the plane. The roof was all aflame now, and great clouds of black smoke hid the ship. He felt as though his clothes were already smouldering in those lurid, curling sheets of flame as he found the tail of the ship. Fighting for consciousness, he lifted the tail to his shoulder. He heaved forward with all his strength. The others were coming closer now.

"Where's Rex?" he heard vaguely, and someone answered: "Chasing the gink that set this—"

The ship had not moved. He gathered his waning forces, and threw every ounce into a tug forward to get the plane under way. He slipped, and fell, blindly, and the heavy tailskid hit him at the base of the neck. Barely conscious, he tried to rise, but could not. He beat feebly at the burning pajama sleeve, scarcely aware of the torture—then oblivion.

A half hour later he came to. His bandaged arm was afire, it seemed, but he asked Young, who was with him:

"How about the ships?"

"All O.K.—two hangars burned. And you owe your being here to Cary!" Young told

him. "He went into that hangar alone—we didn't think you were there—and beat out some of the flames with his hands and got you out before he fainted. Talk about nerve! That thing was a torch!"

"Look what we found on the door of your tent—pinned to it!" Mason broke in, and Rex read, printed crudely in pencil:

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, with fire and flood and sword!"

"That crazy old coot of a mountaineer figures the chap you got away with is dead or something," Mason remarked. "Some of these people, living the way they do, are crazy anyhow. And a lot of 'em have queer religions and get carried away by them. The old fellow probably thinks he's had 'a call' to get revenge for what you did."

And from that moment a red terror lurked in the fastnesses of the forest. Rex, his arm bandaged, and treated by the doctor in Sorrento, insisted on doing his regular patrols. Cary, badly burned, did likewise. At dawn Mason went up, and broadcast the radio message to all the surrounding towns that a maniac was liable to set fires at any time. Thousands

of men—every able-bodied citizen—held themselves in readiness for emergencies. Posses scoured the woods for the "Red Rider" as the newspapers called the crazed old squatter. Portable radio sets were in readiness, trucks were inspected and made ready. Every man in dozens of surrounding towns had his tools ready for instant mobilization. And the fire rangers flew from the first streak of dawn to the last vestige of twilight, their sunken cheeks and tired eyes mute evidences of the strain.

Cary acted very peculiarly. He would not listen to a word about his rescue of Rex, and he repelled all advances made by any member of the flight. He insisted fiercely that he make every possible flight—as though driving himself to the limit. There was something wrong with the man, Rex knew—something on his mind. He was a silent, sunken-eyed, unhealthily flushed demon, who seemed tireless and kept by himself whenever possible.

Forty-eight hours after the alarm had gone out three small fires had been spotted and controlled before they had become dangerous—and then the worst fears of all Oregon were justified. The Red Rider seemed to have vanished

from the earth, despite those fires. Not a pilot had seen him—and then one morning, on the dawn patrol west, a solid line of fire two miles long and a mile wide met Rex's startled eyes. The crazy old woodsman had been at work, and it had burned all night. A two-mile square of flame—the Red Rider was nowhere to be seen, but he must have ridden that night.

The grim-faced young pilot unwound his wireless antenna, and flashed the message. Description, location, all details buzzed into a dozen stations. Fire whistles startled the unseen towns behind the far-stretching peaks, and thousands of men, with that call of horrible significance ringing in their ears, left homes and stores and offices, and in an hour were rushing toward the forests to fight the immemorial, insatiable enemy of the woodland and all who dwell therein.

By the time Rex landed back at the field his plans were made. Thank God, he thought, that Mathews, with two broken legs, had been carried out of danger.

"Each take turns watching for two hour shifts, reporting progress by radio. The fire fighting parties'll have their portable radios

working, of course. Starting tonight, when they should be on hand, I'll take continuous shifts, with different pilots," he told the others, and they accepted the decision of their young chief without a word. All knew that he was the most experienced man among them—and the best radio operator by far. And it takes a wonderful key artist, with the motor roaring so that his ear cannot aid in sending, to direct an army of thousands in fighting a fire. The others, rusty at operating because they had been out of the army for months, could send only simple messages, very slowly.

Rex tried to get some sleep, but could not. Returning pilots reported the fire spreading with terrific speed. Ten miles square by the afternoon. At six o'clock Rex went up, with Mason. Cary begged to be first, but he had just come off duty, and when Rex vetoed the suggestion Cary's gleaming eyes seemed to be wells of hate. Rex wondered briefly why the fellow should be acting the way he was—seemed to have it in particularly for Lee himself, too. But he couldn't be bothered about that now.

For an hour he radioed constantly, accurately charting the fire and directing the rushing men

to different spots along the sides. He figured the places where bare cliffs would help, making natural barriers, and as he surveyed the thousands of acres a mile beneath him his mind was always mapping his campaign, changing it frequently as new arms of fire reached out from the main mass below. The huge black area where the fire had passed was a constant reminder of what the whole virgin forest would be if he could not stop it.

Darkness fell as the first lines of fire fighters got on the job. The ship landed at the field in the half-light, and Young took him up. Rapidly the fire fighters deployed in a huge three-sided formation, and with pick and shovel and axe worked like mad to form blank stretches to stop the fire, changing their position at the will of the youth crouched over his key, far above that red mass of flame which glowed through the darkness like the infernal regions themselves.

At five in the morning it was Cary's turn. And Rex's last tour of duty. He knew he could not stand another—but perhaps this two hours would see that last section cleared. Two sides were tended to now—his last message had or-

dered two thousand men to move ten miles.

Cary being such a poor pilot, Rex took off and flew himself until they reached the scene of the fire. It was dawn now—and it did not look so terrible. He shook the stick, gave control of the ship to Cary and bent to his work.

A half hour later he had a chance to rest his mind after the fierce concentration of his sending. But only for a moment. As Cary kept the plane circling over the red-hot smoke pall below, Lee's bloodshot, heavy-lidded eyes saw something that made his relaxed body stiffen. Two miles back of the main fire-line, on one of the sides from which he had sent the men because he thought the fire conquered, a spark had jumped the gap. A new fire was starting —and the nearest men were two miles away. That brand new fire starting could be mastered in half an hour—two hours later it might never be conquered, for it had a clear sweep for forty miles.

Once again he started that eternal tapping, fighting to keep his worn-out mind concentrated on his sending. Then there came a silence which was like a physical shock. That never-ending roar, which had made his head

sing and his ears totally incapable of hearing anything abruptly ceased. Cary's frightened face, with something maniacal in his eyes, peered back at him.

Rex surveyed the terrain swiftly. One possible chance—the very field he had landed in before. The fire was still a hundred yards from it—the fire-line a mile beyond it. Soon that deserted cabin from which he had snatched his prisoner would be ashes—could they land and beat the fire to the fire-line?

He signaled, pointing to it, and then yelled to Cary:

"Make for that—our only chance. Save your altitude, while I send!"

He must finish his message before they landed—it would save minutes worth hundreds of trees—maybe thousands of dollars. A minute saved now was a day gained later.

He had almost finished his instructions when he was aware that the speed of the ship was tremendous. The propeller blast was like a solid substance battering him. He looked over the side of the quivering, straining ship. They were within a few hundred feet of the ground, diving like mad—and the field was still

a long way ahead! Cary had wasted his altitude in that terrific dive earthward—

He grabbed the stick, to jerk it backward. It did not move. As the ship, its wires screaming like a devil's song, flashed toward the raging fire below, Rex knew what had happened. Cary, hypnotized with horror, had frozen the controls. He was gripping them tightly, temporarily paralyzed with fear.

There was but one thing to do. In a second Rex had the Pyrene fire extinguisher off the cowling between the cockpits. He whirled it around his head, and hit Cary a terrific blow. The body of the ex-cadet slumped and Rex took the stick.

It was touch and go whether they made the field—or whether the ship would drop in the fire a few hundred feet behind it. With all the skill at his command he kept the ship in a shallow glide, and sent his message with the other hand. That must be completed—if he lost a few feet doing it, controlling the fire was more important than a crash in the trees for Cary and him. If they should be crippled, with that fire raging toward them—

He drove that thought from his mind. As

the last dash was completed he turned his full attention to the ship. Stalling downward, occasionally diving a bit steeper to maintain flying speed, he finally brought the ship over the last row of trees. They were so low that the under carriage literally swished through the branches of the doomed monarchs of the woods. He landed the ship with a terrific bump. It had lost speed fifteen feet in the air, but nothing was smashed save one tire.

"Might be the carburetor jets are plugged," Rex thought swiftly. "Maybe I can save her before the fire comes."

The fact that the motor had cut out completely made his diagnosis of the trouble probable. In the midst of eddying smoke and flying cinders, with the rapacious roar of the speeding flames becoming ever louder, the flyer threw open the tool kit and got out a jet wrench. He tore the door at the side of the motor cowling open, and in a sort of wild fury tried to unscrew the jets of the carburetor.

It was then that he came to himself. That hysterical haste would get him nothing. Gasping for air because the smoke was so thick, conscious of the heat of the oncoming fire, Rex

took hold of himself, and forced himself into deliberately skilful action. As carefully and slowly as though he were working back at the field he unscrewed the jets, wiping the smoke tears from his eyes and trying to forget the flames and that unconscious figure in the seat.

In a moment he had them out. And one jet was plugged!

He blew as hard as he could, and dislodged the piece of rubber tubing from the gas-line which had clogged the tiny brass tube. It was all he could do to control himself as the smoke became shot with crimson, and the breath of the fire was hot upon him. Steadily, slowly, forcing himself to make every move count, he got the jet back in.

Then the pent-up fear in him was freed. He beat out a cinder which had landed on one wing, and spun the propeller furiously. It seemed as though a second, now, meant life or death. The hot motor caught on the first try, and with an inarticulate sob of relief he leaped into the cockpit. He saw that Cary had regained consciousness.

The smoke was so thick that he could not see twenty feet ahead of him. The universe was

filled with the crackling roar of the fire as he gave the ship the gun, and sent it hurtling into the opaque smoke ahead. It took the air, and the next second the doomed trees which rimmed the field loomed ahead of him. He lifted the ship in a mighty zoom, and cleared them. For tense seconds he fought the stalling ship, to keep it in the air and out of the forest. And he won. He was a flyer.

In a little while they were up over the dense pall of red-hot smoke, and with streaming eyes and laboring lungs he gulped in the blessed air.

Only for a moment, however, was his mind free. Circling ever higher above the horrible scene below, watching a detachment of men speeding toward the new fire, his gaze fell on the right lower wing. A cinder had lodged in the space between a brace wire and a strut, been fanned by the air-stream—and the linen of the wing was already smouldering.

Cary spotted it at the same time. Rex's racing brain comprehended the two alternatives immediately. They were only eight hundred feet high. If they did not burn alive, he must sideslip, with the burning wing high in the air. And if they did that, the draft generated

by the downward slip would keep the fire from them—but there was nothing but fire below.

Then he saw Cary look around him, and then throw off his belt. Rex started the sideslip, and in utter astonishment watched the man who had been so yellow a few minutes before make his perilous way over the cowling and on the wing. The wing was pointed upward at a steep angle, but Cary crawled up toward its tip—and the fire. Hauling himself along with wires and struts, he inched his way toward that widening flame.

They were so low that the smoke was swirling about the battered ship when Cary reached the fire. Lying flat on the frail linen, holding on with one hand, he beat out the flame with the other hand.

Then Rex came level, a few feet above the flames leaping up at them from below, and prayed while Cary crawled back. The youngster's face was a mask of torture, but bit by bit he made it.

He tumbled into the front cockpit—and there he stayed in an unconscious heap. When Rex reached the field they picked him out, and his right hand was a mass of raw flesh.

That final strain had been too much for Lee. He toppled as he tried to lift Cary out of the cockpit.

It was twelve hours later when he awakened, and soon thereafter very pleasant news was given him. Four army ships were on hand and the fire was well under control.

He learned, too, that four mountaineers had been caught by the fire fighters and had declared that the Red Rider had perished; the onrushing flames had prevented the four from rescuing him.

Cary came alone to see Rex, just before that young gentleman went to sleep for another ten hours.

"I froze controls once in the army—and the armistice saved me from being kicked out," he said, his snapping black eyes meeting Rex's firmly. "The mere thought that maybe the ship wouldn't get over that fire ruined me again. I joined up here to prove to myself that I *wouldn't* freeze 'em again—and I did. I was so worried about it—

"Honestly, though, Rex, when I crawled out on the wing I seemed to get all right again—"

"You've earned another chance," Rex told him as he shook his hand. "You've got nerve, Cary—and—thanks. You'll be all right now. I—er—what was I say—"

He dropped off to sleep again and Cary, happy as though his arm were not torturing him, slipped out while Rex enjoyed the only reward he wanted—sleep!

CHAPTER IV

THE RED RIDER

Rex Lee took a minute to peruse the newspaper which had just arrived from the outside world. "Will the Red Rider Ride Again?" ran the headline on a feature story, built on a vague rumor that the hermit who had terrorized the woods of Oregon for days was not really dead, but merely recovering from his injuries.

"I hope not!" soliloquized the young air ranger as he finished the article and started toward the airplanes on the line. "Not with our ships the way they are!"

The morning sun glinted from the wires and turnbuckles of nine planes—four of them big ton-and-a-half De Haviland bombers, and the others shabby, dirty-looking little training planes. The D. H.'s had come in four days before to help the desperate little crew of temporary patrolmen who had fought day and night to save millions of acres of virgin woodland, dry as tinder and at the mercy of one small

spark. The fire had come, and the army had been called in to help when the little outfit of which Rex was chief could do no more.

On three sides of the mowed field the trees grew thickly—the front rank, as it were, of the trackless forest which flowed up over the mountain ranges, spread across the huge basins between, and was halted only temporarily, here and there, by steep, bare cliffs.

Four mechanics were working on the rickety planes of the regular patrol, and Rex lounged over to watch, and help if he could. The ships had been practically worn out when they had been bought hastily for use during the drouth, but until the new ones arrived they'd have to do. Already they had cost the lives of two patrolmen, and Mathews, in command, was in a hospital in Hoover City with both legs broken.

That meant that Rex was in charge. Now, as he consulted with the greasy mechanics, his thin face still showed signs of the terrific strain he had been under. His large wide-set eyes were yet weary-looking, and his face, tanned and weather-beaten from hundreds of hours of flying, was too lean and bony, and the lines

around his eyes and mouth should not have been etched on the face of a twenty-three-year-old youth.

"The spares won't get here until tomorrow, I'm afraid," he was telling the chief mechanic. "Just have to get the motors ready, so they can be fixed up in the least possible time. Thank heaven those army ships are going to stay a few days!"

"Oh, Rex! The major wants to see you!" bellowed Lieutenant Harry Granger, sticking his tousled head out at the door of the small tent which the major used both as office and sleeping quarters.

The young pilot did not look forward to the interview with any considerable pleasure. Somehow he and the major did not jibe very well, he was reflecting as he walked toward the tent. Rex was in charge of the civilian planes, Major Cranburg of the military planes. The major, likewise, was understood to be general supervisor of the whole flight, while the army planes were there. And the major had some peculiar ideas, which he very much liked to see carried out.

"Morning, Lee," the army man said briskly

as Rex entered and automatically saluted. The old army habit was hard to shake off.

"Here are the assignments for today—patrols. With these nine ships we can cover every inch of the territory five times between now and dark."

Rex listened in amazement, his hand smoothing his unruly dark hair as he tried to formulate the words he wanted to utter. He was aware of long, thin, lanky Granger, scrutinizing him with a glimmer of amusement deep down in his bright blue eyes.

"But, sir, our Jennys aren't in condition to fly—they were wrecks, almost before we got 'em and several days of flying eight and ten hours a day put them just about out of commission. But spare parts'll be in tomorrow and—"

"They're all right—they were flying yesterday, weren't they?" snapped Cranburg.

He was a small, fox-faced man with a nervous manner, and a habit of puffing out his lower lip far beyond his upper, which was garnished with a small, spike-like moustache.

"Yes, sir. But they're being overhauled now—most of them miss at intervals now, and they need spare parts of various kinds. It's

suicide to keep flying them over these woods, without a landing field anywhere, practically speaking. I thought you'd use the army ships, just cover the territory that hasn't been burned over or rained on, and give us a chance to get ready. There's two hundred thousand acres burned and all that Gernti basin had a shower yesterday. The Jaekel basin over east, though, is in terrible shape. We could spell the army flyers on the army ships, keep them flying all day long."

"Lee, I wish I'd had you under me about a month in the army," the major said grimly. "Who asked you for suggestions? I'm in command here. And your bunch of amateurs aren't going to ruin my ships. Fly your own. And another thing. This whole territory is going to be covered, see?"

"Major, our ships can't fly!"

"They can fly. They flew yesterday. This is an emergency. Of course, if you're scared—"

Cranburg's voice stopped on an inquiring note, and suddenly a dark flush mounted to the slender young flyer's tired face. Two weeks ago he'd have just about blown up through the

top of the tent—now it seemed as though he were a thousand years old. The responsibilities and perils of the last few days had given him a fatalistic calm.

Fighting for control, he spoke very slowly, but his sunken eyes were like two balls of fire deep in his head.

"Major Cranburg, you're understood to be in general command, but I'm responsible for my men and my ships. I know that it would be one to two some of them would never come back, and I won't let one of those ships fly until they're repaired. You can do what you like about it, but that goes, and I've nothing more to say!"

For a second the fidgety, stiff little martinet at the table glared back into his civilian subordinate's flaming eyes. Then he said sarcastically, apparently in an effort to cover his confusion:

"You say it isn't necessary to keep constant patrols everywhere. How about the so-called 'Red Rider'? Who's got any proof, except the word of four fire-crazed mountaineers, that he isn't ready to start another blaze anywhere? He may not be dead. You stole his son away

and started all this fuss, didn't you? I should think you might realize—"

"I arrested his son for breaking fire regulations, and there isn't any real proof that the Red Rider is dead. But if he starts another fire it will be over in the Jaekel basin. After the rain he wouldn't have much chance for additional revenge for his son over where it rained—and there's all that burned territory that's no good to him. The army planes can cover the Jaekel today. When we get ours fixed up, we can cover all the territory. But these fellows risked their lives for two weeks and I won't send 'em out in those planes! I tell you it's suicide, Major—and they shan't go when there's no real need of it!"

"Don't talk to me like that, sir!" flared Cranburg nastily, all his military ideas outraged. He leaped to his feet behind the desk. "You obey my orders, or I'll send in a report of insubordination that'll ruin you for life. Granger! Call Young, Mason and the other patrolmen of Lee's in here. Lee, wait for your men outside!"

"Stick to your guns, old man," whispered Granger hurriedly as they got outside. "He's

crazy. He's an artilleryman—not a bad scout, but he hasn't been in the Air Service three months since he learned to fly!"

Lee's face was set and his eyes gleaming as he waited for the others to come. For two weeks he and his aides had fought a lonesome, desperate fight, flying until human flesh and blood could stand it no longer, in worn-out ships, over territory which meant that a missing motor meant a broken neck. Now those planes were in terrible shape. If there was any real need of flying them—a desperate emergency—they would, of course. They had proved that. But now his duty as he saw it was to stand his ground. If Cranburg ruined him by his report—perhaps even sent him to jail—all well and good. But there was bitterness in the heart of the pilot as he lined up in front of Cranburg with his four assistants.

"Mr. Lee has refused to order you gentlemen to go up today on regular patrols in your own ships. Thinks they'll fall to pieces all of a sudden. So I'm taking you from under his orders. Here are your patrols. Be ready to go in half an hour."

The major ceased his barking commands,

and looked over the faces before him for a moment. Outside, three great Liberty motors sprang into roaring life. The army pilots and observers were preparing to start on their patrols.

Big, slow Mason stood stoically, his eyes flickering toward Lee. Nervous, eager little Cary seemed in a quandary, his glances shifting somewhat fearfully between Lee and Cranburg. The others were patently at a loss. No one spoke, for a moment, and then the major said again—

"If any of the rest of you are afraid—"

"That's enough of that!" said the huge Mason calmly. "We ain't army men any more, you know."

But Young, a fiery youth with a pugnacious jaw and merry eyes, was stung by the insinuation of the yellowness.

"Any time I'm scared to fly, you jest let me know!" he burst out. "I'll go—"

"You won't!" stated Rex quietly. "You fellows, and these ships, and the success of this patrol are my responsibility now. You're state servants, and I'm your boss. If we take those crates up now, we're not only doing some-

thing foolish, but we're taking a chance on ruining our equipment so it won't be a bit of good from today on. We'd try to do unnecessary work today—and probably be helpless for two weeks. There's not a man here'll go—and if there's any trouble, it's my funeral. I've told the major we'll fly his ships all he wants us to—but not those superannuated hearses that can hardly hold together now!"

"You'll go behind the bars for this!" Cranburg shouted furiously. Accustomed to twenty years of unquestioned obedience, he was beside himself. He forgot that every man under him knew more about flying than he did.

"The dickens you will," drawled Mason. "You lose, Major. Any time—"

"If you want us to fly your ships, or any serviceable ship, including our own when they get spares, we'll fly ten hours a day. We've done it before," Rex finished.

He saluted, and walked out, followed by the others. Behind the major's back he caught a portentous wink from Granger, but that did not relieve the misery within him. He watched the De Havilands, each carrying an experienced observer as well as a pilot, take off and then

wandered toward the line as the fourth army plane left the ground.

"Cheer up, Rex," said Cary's voice in his ear. "You'll be all right. He can make a lot of trouble for you if only he just wants to, but—"

"Oh, it isn't that," Rex returned absently, as he watched the third ship take off. "We're here to save these woods, and all that, but I hate—"

He broke off, and finally Cary, sensing that his chief was not in a conversational mood, said:

"Well, I'm going to help those mechanics. Say, that was a dirty crack about your being responsible for the fire, on account of arresting Red's son and driving Red into being a crazy firebug, wasn't it?"

"Oh, that's all right. Maybe the Red Rider —that's a blood and thunder name the papers gave him, isn't it?—didn't break his neck falling from his horse, and maybe he is alive. But if he is he wouldn't try to start another fire in territory already burned, or on land that's been soaked with rain."

"Sure. Cranburg's bughouse," the sharp-

faced little Cary laughed, and trotted off toward the ships.

The reaction of days of tense strain had come to Rex, and the unpleasant ordeal just over had hit him hard. Born with a love for the woods, it had been strengthened by many summers spent tramping them. Every acre of forest land which was destroyed—either by profiteering lumbermen or fire—was like a personal loss to him, because he loved the woods, and knew that five-sixths of the vast forest preserves of the country had been ruthlessly, inexcusably, cruelly ravished. And transcending even that was the knowledge that the vast, rich, pulsing country was fast losing its great natural heritage. Twenty years from now, unless something was done, the few remaining millions of acres would also be plundered wastes—unlovely, unproductive, grim sores on a country which had thrown birthright to the winds.

That was why he was risking his life to preserve them—that and his belief that in the work he would learn more about flying under adverse conditions than any place else in the nation. Now, because his idea of duty had been

strong enough to stimulate him into defiance of blundering, wasteful, needless orders, he was to be held up to the world as a yellow slacker—

"Well, go ahead, Major!" the pilot soliloquized grimly. "I'm doing the best I know—you do the same!"

The army ships had disappeared behind the towering crags of the first mountains. He wandered toward the regular patrol planes, then back to his tent. Somehow it seemed to him that he never could get sleep enough. Those fierce days had made him a wreck—

Suddenly, from the radio set in an adjoining tent, there came a stream of crackling symbols. As he bounded toward the tent, he was translating them automatically. Three general alarms were now being picked up at a dozen stations in outlying towns, where thousands of men stood always ready to drop everything and mobilize against the terrible scourge which jeopardized not only the woods, but towns in its path.

But it wasn't a general alarm. Fire just started—men wanted from Sorrento, Hoover City and Harwell. Only Lee, who knew his

maps perfectly, got the location immediately. It had started three miles west of the line of hills on the eastern boundary of the great basin. And the wind was from the east—it was sweeping, it must be, right down toward the hundreds of thousands of acres—

He looked up at the wind vane, and for a moment could not believe his eyes. The wind had changed in the last hour. It was now from the southwest! If it would only turn west, it would blow the flames toward the boundary hills—and there was a solid cliff, nearly sheer rock, extending for miles, three quarters of the way up the mountains. A perfect fire barrier! Even southwest was not so bad—that wind would protect the basin somewhat.

Forsythe, the radio operator, was taking down the message rapidly. Lee, his eyes blazing with excitement now, shouted the news, which was relayed down the line. It meant that he, the most experienced man on fighting lines, who was an expert radio operator, would have to go up and direct the small army of men who were even now mobilizing for the fray.

Then the radio ceased, just as Major Cranburg came bursting from his tent and all paths

led toward the radio shelter. Forsythe came toward Lee with his message.

"The Red Rider set it, sir!" the man said excitedly. "He wasn't no more dead than I am. The message, from Plane 3, says that they seen a rider, between the fire and them cliffs out there, and they swooped down and seen it was the fellow you described; old feller with red beard and hair, and he was riding like the wind!"

"We'll cook his goose!" bellowed Major Cranburg, who had puffed into the scene in time to hear the last of the operator's news. "I've got machine guns on my ship, and we'll get him. He won't start any more fires!"

It seemed as though a hundred scenes flashed through Rex's head in a few seconds. First he thought of the day when he had spotted one of the few miserable squatters who lived deep in the woods, burning a fire outside a shack. All of them had been warned by the fire patrol, so he had thought to teach these hermits a lesson, and dropped down and arrested the man. "The Red Rider," as the newspapers had called him, was the father of the half-witted mountaineer whom he had arrested, and who was now

in a home for the feebleminded. The Rider had arrived on the scene just too late to make trouble, but Rex would never forget the long-haired woodsman with hands raised, vowing vengeance on the mysterious emissary who was carrying his son into the dreaded outside world.

Then came the memory of the night when the Red Rider, who must be a sort of maniac, had stolen into the camp and tried to kill Rex, leaving a rudely scrawled note behind warning all the world that he would avenge his son. Doubtless his childlike reasoning had led him to decide that if the dreaded men from civilization were so insistent that there be no fires, then starting them was the best method of revenging himself.

Certainly he had started fire after fire. He had become a gaunt red terror, lurking in the trackless depths of the forest, where no man or men could find him. Other squatters had said he had been thrown from his horse and had perished in one of his own fires. Now it seemed that he had only been injured, and was again riding as of yore.

There was a terrible menace bound up in that

red-haired old mountaineer, but Rex, passionate lover of the woods as he was, nevertheless pitied the man. He knew a little about the squatters of the mountains, and realized something of their terrible superstition, fear of the outside world, and inability to comprehend such things as law or government or patriotism. They lived to themselves, a completely isolated and consequently utterly ignorant class who were not responsible for their own actions. Shooting him down in cold blood would be horrible—

"Major, with all the fire fighters coming on, now that we've got him spotted and can keep track of him, we could get him alive—"

"We can't take any chances. The old firebug is destroying valuable lives and thousands of dollars' worth of property. We've got to stop him. I can spray his section with bullets in about fifteen minutes—soon as I can get there—"

"But we can get him alive, sir, and it seems sort of a shame—those people do not understand what they're doing—"

"Bosh! We can't take chances, I tell you, in a case like this."

"Will you give me just one chance? We've got planes—it takes only one at a time to handle a small fire like that—and by nightfall we might have him alive!"

Rex pleaded passionately for the old man's life, and finally Cranburg agreed, although he said much about the risks involved.

"You handle the fire," he said grudgingly.

The supervisor, who had left the day before, had said plainly that Rex was the best air general, by natural ability and experience, available. Cranburg did not dare do anything but agree. "I'll be right with you, in my ship. And I'll watch him, and if he makes one wrong move, I'll use the guns."

In two minutes Rex was in his Jenny. He was going to fly and work the radio, both. No use putting two men's lives in jeopardy when one would do, now that he was rested somewhat. His ship wasn't in as bad shape as the others, at that. He took off with a roar, noting delightedly that the wind was now straight from towns many miles distant. Their work to the fire-fighting units getting under way from towns many miles distant. Their work would not be so hard, now.

The major did not take off until Rex was high in the sky, winging his way toward the fire. It was thirty miles away. The D. H. was so much faster than Lee's, however, that by the time the pall of smoke over the Jaekel basin was in sight the D. H. was even with the Jenny. Army ship Number 3 was still circling over the five-mile line of fire, which was burning like mad under the lash of the wind. The plane left for the field as soon as Rex and the major arrived on the scene.

The fire army would not arrive for two hours yet; so after laying out a general campaign—a simple one, because of the cliffs which would dam the flames almost before the men got there—Rex looked for the Red Rider. He saw the major hovering over a spot a few miles away, and banked around and headed in that direction. Underneath him a thousand acres were a mass of flames and red-shot smoke, and long tongues of fire licked greedily toward the sheer crags of the guardian mountains.

Then Rex saw him. He had not yet ridden clear of the fire which he had started, and which had turned on him due to the change in the wind. He was riding like mad, parallel with

the cliffs, striving to get around the fire before it penned him in against those sheer walls of rock. He'd make it all right, Rex saw. He had only two miles or so to go now, before reaching his goal.

Thereafter Rex paid little attention to him. They'd capture him later. He was watching one long line of fire which had found an unusually dry trail, and was now lapping at the foot of the cliff. What made the young pilot crouch in his seat, and watch tensely, was the possibility of disaster he saw below as a bush, growing in a crevice twenty feet from the ground, began to burn. For there were other scrubby growths in the crevices zigzagging upward.

It was as horrible to him as it would have been to see a huge snake crawling toward him. Bit by bit the flame ate its way upward, sometimes leaping gaps of fifteen feet from bush to bush. And on top of the cliff, seeming to spring from a fissure which was the end of the crevices in which the small growths had taken root, there was a scrubby stunted tree, its bare limbs signifying that it was dead. If that tree caught, the flames had leaped the barrier of the cliff, and hundreds of thousands of acres of

forest on the other side were at the mercy of that wind-blown crimson scourge below.

As though the gods were pulling strings to wring the heart of the lonesome pilot above the shambles below, Rex, as he glanced over toward the fleeing Red Rider, saw the old man swept from his horse by a low limb. He lay motionless as his mount galloped on in crazed fear of the fire, now a half mile back of the path which the rider had been taking. A mile on, the steed would be out of the path of the fire. In the path of the fire there was a scraggy cleared field, next to a rotting, deserted squatter's cabin.

A plan leaped into Rex's mind. Desperate, but—

As he sent his ship in a wide-open power dive toward the earth, he remembered the time he had seen a telephone pole snapped off by the wing of a ship in full flight, and prayed that it might be his luck that day. Probably the tree was rotten anyhow. If he got that down, the forest on the other side was safe.

The tree was afire as he straightened his ship for it. The wires screamed with the speed, and the frail, wornout Jenny seemed about to go to

pieces. It was trembling from nose to tail, as the grim-faced young pilot sent it flashing downward toward that tree and raging furnace far below the cliffs.

Head over the side, he flew as a master-flyer should. There was a jar as the left wing, traveling a hundred and thirty miles an hour, snapped off the tree five feet from the ground. And the end of that wing was wobbling strangely as Rex came level.

He glanced behind him. Forty feet of smooth, bare rock between that stumpy torch and the edge of the forest. With the stick all the way over to the right, he fought his crippled ship as the heat below sent it upward, and in a few seconds saw the tree reduced to ashes—and the rest of the forest was not afire. As he flew his lopsided ship toward the Red Rider, he was aware of the D. H. circling down toward him.

He had planned to reach the field, land, and go back after the old man if he could catch the horse. Now that was impossible. There was not time enough, at the rate the fire was coming—and the ship would not make it. At any moment that wing might go wholly bad—

Fighting with all his skill to keep the crippled ship in the air, he finally reached the spot where the Red Rider lay. The under carriage was scraping the trees, barely discernible through the smoke. He let the crippled left wing drop, and with full top-rudder side slipped down between two trees, set fifteen feet apart. He cut the motor, and crashed the left wing into the ground. Tearing linen, splintering wood, the clang of metal and wire—but he was safe in the wreck. A half minute later he was bending over the gaunt, unconscious form of the dreaded Red Rider.

Staggering a bit, he lifted it to his shoulder, and lurched along blindly. The smoke made his eyes water and his lungs labor terribly. He would never make it—

Then the old man regained consciousness. In a few words Rex gasped out the story. The blaze in the old lunatic's eyes died down, and soon he was running alongside of Rex.

The D. H. swooped down over them, and Rex saw the major gesture through the smoke, pointing ahead. He was going to land on that clearing to rescue them. That was surer than the chance that they could beat the fire—but

the major was such a rotten flyer that something was likely to happen!

He made that landing though to his undying credit, and as the two fleeing men reeled into the clearing the ship was ready for the take-off.

"You fly her!" yelled the major, which was the act of a man. He tacitly admitted that they were all surer of life if Rex took off. They threw the old man in the rear cockpit, the major was in beside him in a trice, and then the exhausted, blinded, gasping Rex shoved the throttle all the way ahead and the mighty Liberty carried the bomber across the rough ground. Rex scraped the trees to get over them but a minute later they were over the cliffs, with a chance to land where there was no fire, if necessary. He took just long enough to see that his maneuver had stopped the fire from hurdling the crags—and there was no other spot where it could—before he sent the ship like a bullet toward home.

They were no sooner out of the ship on the field than the major, in the presence of the flyers who had run to meet them, held out his hand and said simply:

"I've been a fool. I apologize, and I'm

proud to know you, Lee. And if it takes every army man I know, and an interview with every Congressman and Senator, you'll get the medal of honor for what you've done this day!"

A half hour later, with the major flying him, he was up over the fire again. They spent six hours in the air that day; the fire was conquered because it was spotted quickly, fought promptly, and had not leaped the cliff.

And two days later, when Rex had had the thirty hours of sleep to which everybody agreed his service entitled him, he walked up to the major with a grin.

"Remember what you told me about getting me a medal of honor, Major Cranburg?" he queried.

The major nodded, a puzzled smile on his face.

"Well, I'll cancel it," Rex declared, "if you'll arrange for me to get a job with the air mail some time soon. That is, if they think I can handle a ship well enough—"

The major's grunt interrupted.

"Lee, you've got the job! I'll see all those same Senators and Representatives if necessary—but somehow I'll arrange for you to get

into the air mail service. If you want to be a mail man—the danger season's about over here —I'm all for you!"

And the major was as good as his word. Two weeks later Rex got a long envelope from the big eastern air transport company that handled the mail contracts between New York and Chicago.

"Major Cranburg tells us glowing tales of your ability as a flyer," the letter informed him, "and says you would like to serve on an air mail line. We should be delighted to talk to you about the matter—in fact, we can probably use you any time you say on the Ohio-Pennsylvania run. Will you come to Chicago, at our expense, to see us?"

Rex Lee's fingers almost shook as he folded the sheet of paper and put it back into its envelope. Slim Lindley had been a mail flyer —now he was going to be one!

"And it all traces back to that hardware store," he chuckled. "I might still be doing cadet work at Kelly Field if it hadn't come along. . . . Well, it can't be any more exciting, even if it does show me more cross-country work, than hunting the Red Rider!"

CHAPTER V

NOTHING STOPS THE MAIL

A HALF mile high, as lonesome as though the world itself was non-existent, a De Haviland which was as white as a phantom ship was doggedly fighting its way through the terrible sleet and snow. Not even the roar of its great four hundred and fifty horsepower Liberty motor could be heard on the ground, for the wail of the wind and the pounding of the sleet were like the voices of the giants of the storm, drowning out all other things.

Hunched down in the single cockpit of his plane, Rex Lee grimly endured what seemed to be unendurable torture. The mail must get through. That slogan is graven on the hearts and minds of the few dozen men who fly the air mail from coast to coast, night and day, fair weather or foul. *The mail must get through.* And Rex, flying his third trip as a mail pilot, had already assimilated that motto so

thoroughly that it was a tangible part of his being.

Miserable, physically and mentally, he struggled on. He could not see the ground at all, nor could his probing eyes glimpse even the edges of his wings, at times. The struts and linen of his ship were coated with ice and snow, and even his control wires, leading back from rudder and stock to elevators and rudder, were like white clothes lines. Where he was he did not know—somewhere between Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, and Cleveland, Ohio. As he was thrown around in the wind, constantly blinded by the crusting of ice which formed over his goggles, he realized that he might have been blown northward, and be over the far-stretching expanse of Lake Erie, on the southern shore of which Cleveland sprawls for miles.

His face, despite his efforts to protect it, was a raw, bleeding mass. The pounding of the rain, when one is traveling a hundred miles an hour, is constant torture—but the sleet was infinitely worse. Every individual crystal did its share in cutting his face to pieces. Finally it seemed as though the nerves had become numb—that his face was past being hurt. It

was just one dull ache, with occasional twinges of exquisite pain as the wind blew the sleet against it with temporarily increased fury.

Somehow the peril which confronted him on every side, however, was secondary to the mental misery which filled him. For the slim pilot was very young to uphold the responsibilities which were his. He was filled with apprehension which, for the moment, meant more than the physical danger. Had he done wrongly, back there a few miles, to brave that terrific storm and try to fly the mail through on time? Even if he came out of it alive, would he be thrown out of the service for imperiling the mail by poor judgment? To be sure, he had calculated he was only seventy-five miles from Cleveland—less than an hour's run—when the blizzard had broken—and he had not dreamed it was so bad, nor so extensive. He had thought he could fly the mail through. It was his strained desire to take no chances of being deemed unworthy of his job that had caused him to gamble his life against the successful completion of the trip. He *must not* lose the place he had won. If he was to follow in the steps of Slim Lindley, the boy in the

silver ship, he must prove his courage and his skill. Lindley, he felt sure, would not have failed. . . . That, plus his already deep pride in the service he had wanted so long to become a part of, had sent him hurtling into the sleet and snow instead of landing.

He had been flying a half hour in it now, doggedly holding his course. That is, as closely as he could. The screaming wind no one could gauge. He might have been blown miles northward, although he had tried to compensate for it by "crabbing" into it.

Suddenly there came to his practiced perceptions the consciousness of a new and definite danger. The ship commenced to vibrate. It was not so bad now, but he knew it would become rapidly worse. The storm had commenced to ruin the great six-foot propeller which was fighting the sleet at fifteen hundred revolutions a minute. The icy particles were chewing into the tips of it. He had hoped against hope that the storm would slacken—at least turn into mere snow or rain, but instead it seemed to be growing colder all the time, which would preclude either of these possibilities. He must start down. He could not

get the mail into Cleveland on time. If he was over the lake, probably never.

For a moment the young flyer was utterly hopeless. His strained, fevered nerves brought all sorts of bugaboos to torture him. For a few seconds he hoped that he would be killed.

Then there came to him a sort of moral second wind, as there comes to a runner when he seems to have utterly exhausted himself a new supply of breath to his lungs and strength to his jaded muscles. For a while Rex had touched the depths of hopelessness and discouragement. Now he thrust his jaw forward, literally slammed his stick ahead, and there came a sort of hard glitter into his boyish eyes. He'd lam that De Haviland down through that storm, he'd keep her up, prop or no prop, until he got a place to land, and could get the mail to a train. If he was over the lake, all right. He'd fly south and trust to the flyers' gods to keep that prop together, and the ship from shaking itself to pieces, until he got to shore.

The altimeter could not be trusted to save him from crashing into any high obstacle, like a chimney or a tower. It was not that sensitive. It did not change immediately. It might

read three hundred feet when the ship was actually only fifty feet off the ground. He must strive to pierce the storm with his eyes, and watch for the earth.

He thrust his head over the side of the cockpit, losing what little protection the windshield gave him. Without flinching he exposed his raw, swollen face to the full might of the storm, and constantly wiped his goggles to keep them clean. His helmet and leather coat were encrusted with frozen snow, and he looked like a white devil of the storm, riding it in its fury with the delight of a demon.

A thousand feet—five hundred. Not a glimpse of the earth yet. He handled his ship with the skill of the veteran airman. Watching the speed meter, he kept his ship from diving too fast, or stalling. Rapidly the vibration grew worse, but the ground was close, now—

There was an interval of breathless suspense. When would it come into view, vaguely white below him, and would it be the ground or a sea of tossing ice floes?

Suddenly, with a mighty whoop of mingled terror and delight, he pulled back on the stick. Looming close ahead of him there had sprung

into view snow-enswathed wires and poles. The ship barely missed them as he zoomed. Everything was white. That was why he had not been able to see them until the last minute. That was a road below him, although he could see no houses. But it was blessed to see the earth, even if he had to fly dangerously low.

He saw a smooth white expanse—large and level. No one could tell what lay below its blanket of snow. He must land. Fighting the wind, he circled slowly until he was headed into it. There was one comfort—it was so strong that he could land at a ground speed of only twenty-five or thirty miles an hour.

The ship dropped slowly over the fence, and Rex jockeyed to it to keep it in the air as long as possible, in order to make a stall landing.

At the last minute he pulled the nose high in the air. The ship dropped, tailskid first, and then the wheels. It bounced somewhat, and then rolled loggily through the clinging snow. There were a few seconds of suspense—even a log underneath the snow would turn the ship over on its back. Then it stopped, unharmed. The idling motor was not audible above the shriek of the wind.

The snow was only six or eight inches deep, he found. For a second Rex stood beside the ship. He was thinking of what he ought to do. He must leave the mail unguarded, and set out to find an automobile to transport it to the nearest railroad. He should have been exultant because he was safe on the ground, but instead he was worrying. For one thing, where was he? If he was far off-course, there could be no explanation satisfactory to the chief. They'd say, and rightly, that a storm too big to keep one's course in was too big to attempt to fly through, and chance the destruction of the mail. The air mail pilot's judgment must never fail. The cargo entrusted to him is of almost infinite value, every day, for the mails carry letters which mean everything to thousands of people.

He had seen no house—but he could see practically nothing through a storm like that. As though it had come into being merely to destroy him, and was now frustrated, it seemed to be decreasing a bit in violence.

There was no choice for him to make as to which direction he should take. He started for the road, which was across an intervening

flat field, and left the motor idling. It would undoubtedly freeze in the bitter cold if he stopped it, and that would necessitate a long stay while a new motor was shipped and installed.

On the road he turned to his right. At a half-run his weary legs carried him through the snow.

He had not proceeded more than two hundred yards when he caught sight of a black spot against the white blanket on a field to his right. It was a man, stumbling through the snow toward the ship.

Rex yelled, but there was no answer. He leaped the fence and ran toward the stranger. At intervals he shouted. Finally, in a moment when the decreasing wind was temporarily quiet, he saw the other man turn at his call. They ran toward each other.

As the stranger came closer, Rex saw that he was a boy, in knickerbockers. He might have been fifteen years old, and he had neither hat, coat, nor gloves. So there must be a house close by—thought Rex.

"Where were you going?" panted Lee, relieved that it was a boy. Robbery had leaped

into his mind as a possibility. The mail was unguarded.

"To—get you!" gasped the boy, a wild gleam in his blue eyes. "I've been out waiting for you to come along—but I couldn't see you in the storm—"

"Waiting for me!"

"Yes—I knew it was time for the mail plane to come through, and I thought I could signal you some way and you might come down and help me—"

Lee shouted with pure delight. He must be right on his course, by some miracle! The miracle itself he did not realize himself. As in all born flyers, there was an instinct akin to that of a homing pigeon in Rex Lee.

"Where's Cleveland," demanded the happy flyer. "And what's the matter?"

"Over there!" panted the boy, and then burst forth: "Mister, will you come back with me? Then I can go for help. Father's alone with those men—"

The youngster was sobbing hysterically now. Rex forgot his own troubles for the present as he took the boy by the shoulders, and shook him gently.

"Tell me slowly!" he commanded, sharply, in order to bring the boy to himself.

He put his coat, stiff with ice, around the heaving shoulders of the boy, and then said: "All right—shoot!"

The story which the boy told in gulps was brief. He had been out in the barn when he caught sight, through a window, of his father struggling with two men. And the man who worked on the place was not to be seen anywhere. The boy could go for help to the nearest place, a quarter of a mile up the road, and he had been on the way, watching for the mail plane as he went. There was only one man there, old Mr. Hadley. Though he had a telephone.

He stopped, his body heaving with sobbing breaths. A thousand questions swarmed in Rex's stunned mind, but he realized there was no time to lose.

"No one saw you through the window?" he demanded quickly.

"N-no, sir. Won't you please—"

"Sure. I'm going right now. You go on and get help. Telephone for it and bring back Hadley. I'll do my best. Before you go—how

far is Cleveland from here, and have you got a car?"

"Fifty miles this way. And we've got a car. So've the men—"

"Run like a deer, son, and I'll do my best! Cheer up—they won't hurt your dad. They may want to rob him, that's all. Hustle!"

Without the weight of his coat running was easier. He plunged back to the road, and was soon loping along it, his heart pounding with excitement. He could get the mail to Cleveland only three hours behind schedule now. He might dare to fly it, after he took care of those men. He had a Colt A5 on him—if he could sneak up and surprise them—if they hadn't gone—it might be easy. He wondered why two men should raid what must be an isolated farmhouse. Maybe the father was a miser or something. The boy had said it was not far—right-hand side of the road—he must be careful—

Then he saw it. It was a large white house, set among towering trees. A large barn was in back of it, and a car stood in the driveway at one side. Obviously, the attackers had not gone yet. He wondered if they were keeping a lookout. Perhaps they were busy ransacking

the house. Evidently they had taken care of the hired man and his wife, the only other people in the house, first. They'd figure themselves safe from interference in the storm, although it had now died out into a soft snow.

Lee's swollen, freckled face was set and his puffed blue eyes literally ablaze as he approached the house. He decided he must try the back door. After they had put the old man away, they would be in other parts of the house, and the struggle had been in the kitchen, at the rear of the house.

He used the barn, and then a small structure which seemed to be a henhouse for cover. It was rather an impressive establishment, altogether—the house was very large, and the place well-kept. Stooping low, he ran the few yards from the corner of the henhouse to the window which the boy had evidently looked through. Vague footprints in the snow indicated that.

Peering cautiously through the window, Lee saw at the table, bound and gagged, a white-haired man, his strong, square face half covered with the binding of the gag. The thugs must be somewhere in the house, bent on robbery,

decided the young pilot. He could rush in, untie the old man, then the two of them could—

Just then the door opened, a short, squat, dark-faced fellow dressed in a dark suit entered. Rex dropped out of sight. For a second his swift-working mind surveyed possibilities. He decided to take a chance that the second man would not enter for a minute or two, and try to get them one at a time. If the other fellow was in another part of the house he could take them both by surprise.

He paused a moment at the door listening. There was the noise of the striking of a match. With infinite care the pilot tried the door. It was unlocked. He listened, scarcely breathing. His heart was pounding until it seemed that it would give warning to those inside.

With a gasp of commingled excitement and fear, he flung the door wide open and stepped inside. His Colt was in his hand.

"Put 'em up!" he snapped, softly, to keep anyone else in the place from hearing him.

The dark-faced thief was literally paralyzed. His cigaret was motionless in his hand.

Then, his beady black eyes gleaming, he slowly raised his hands. There was no gun observable on him.

He had barely thrust his hands into the air when a huge form burst from the door leading into the next room. As though shot from a catapult, the giant hurled himself the few feet toward Lee.

But he never reached the pilot. Dodging, Rex shot. But before the pilot could whirl again, the first man was on him. As Lee's eyes had turned toward his new opponent, the dark-faced foreigner had gone into action.

The slim airman was no match for his heavy, terrifically strong antagonist. They crashed to the wall, the thug's hand on Rex's wrist, forcing the gun downward. They overturned the table, and then staggered back, each man with one arm locked around the other in violent combat.

Rex struggled fiercely. In the back of his mind were a thousand agonized thoughts. He had failed—and not only that, the mail was held up indefinitely.

With the impetus of this to galvanize his weary muscles he fought like a hundred and

thirty-five pounds of wild cat. But he could not tear loose—nor twist his hand away to use the gun. Then, as the powerful outlaw forced him backward, Rex fell backward over the prone body of the giant he had shot. In an instant he was on the floor beneath his burly antagonist, helpless.

Very white teeth gleamed fiercely, as the man snarled down into the pilot's face. Slowly, subjecting Rex to ever-increasing torture, the man twisted his wrist. With a low moan of pain the young flyer let his fingers relax around the butt of the gun, just in time to save himself a broken arm.

Holding the struggling Lee down with his knees and one hand, the man got the gun, and then leaped lightly to his feet. He kept the gun trained on Lee, who lay panting on the floor. The outlaw was not even breathing hard. He had somewhat the look of an ape, with his long arms and big hands, and he seemed to have the strength of one. Nevertheless, he was comparatively well-dressed.

The old man had been watching, his eyes rolling from side to side. He was bound so tightly that he was unable to move a muscle.

"The Air Mail, eh?" said Rex's opponent softly, a strong accent in his words.

He did not even stoop to examine the man Rex had shot, who occasionally moved convulsively.

"Why deed you come here?" he asked.

His words were calm, and his face composed. He seemed to be unaffected by the wounded or dead man on the floor, and to hold no particular malice against the pilot. There was suspicion in his broad, crafty face, however, as he asked the question.

For a moment Rex could not decide what to say. Then he settled on a bold stroke. It seemed to be as effective a thing as he could do—and it would appreciably hasten the moment when he could get under way with the mail. He *must* do that. Perhaps he had been wrong to put himself in this position—his duty was to get that mail into Cleveland some way—and yet, as he thought of that boy's face he knew in his heart he had done rightly, whether or not the mail service thought so.

"I came here because this gentleman's son ran across me on his way for help. He was out in the barn, and you never saw him. By

this time he has telephoned, warning the sheriff, the alarm will be out all around, and he's on his way back with armed men raised from the nearest farmhouses!"

A single word, in some foreign language, dropped from the man's lips like a hot coal. Before he could go on, Rex interrupted in a torrent of words. He wanted to make his suggestion before the man should try to make his escape.

"Look here! Your case is hopeless. I should have merely stayed on guard instead of butting in," he said swiftly, trying to bluff his way through. One old man was the only help to be counted on for two hours, perhaps. "You've not killed anybody, have you? I shot your friend. If you give yourself up voluntarily, and give up what loot you've got, you'll get a light sentence. You'll be caught anyway if you don't, within two hours. Probably shot, if you put up any fight. They—they'll stick you the limit. I'll guarantee to testify that you had me down and could have made a break, and this gentleman is bound to do the same."

It sounded very reasonable to Rex as he talked. He knew that sentences were always

much more lenient when criminals give themselves up and plead guilty—and the only crime, so far as he knew, of which this man had been guilty that day had been robbery. Attempted robbery, if he left whatever loot he had in the house.

But was robbery all? There came a premonition that it was not, as he saw his captor hesitate. Surely a man must be mad to hesitate—and yet, why should robbers pick a lonely house on a day like this for a robbery? Could the bound man have the reputation of being very wealthy, or of keeping a good deal of money in his house? It didn't sound reasonable.

"Where was the boy, and how deed he know?" snapped his cool, poised guard.

"He was in the barn, and saw you two at work through that window."

Like a cat the man seemed to glide across the floor to the window. He looked out. Then he turned and nodded.

"I see the footsteps," he stated quietly, his beady black eyes shining, but without expression. He was uncannily collected for a man in his desperate situation.

Suddenly he threw away his cigaret.

"Your sheep is near-by?" he enquired.

Rex, knowing that the truth was the only possible thing to tell, owing to the fact of his presence, nodded. He was still lying on the floor, close by the huddled body of the giant and underneath the steady eyes of the old man.

"You weel carry me to Canada, land me somewhere, and so I weel escape!" his dark-faced guard said suddenly.

Rex's avalanche of words—explanations about the propeller, the storm, the fact that there was only one seat in the plane, were interrupted in full career by the suddenly vicious outlaw.

"Say nothing!" he snarled.

Then with a fierce calmness he began to talk.

"I weel know when we get there whether or not to start!" he said. "I have read much of the airplanes—and I weel take a chance. I shall tell you why, so that you weel not fool with me, knowing I would sooner die than be caught. In an airplane, by gun, any way.

"Listen. Fifteen years ago that man back there sentence me, and another, to prison for

life for accidentally keeling an old man. I was only seventeen years old. For fifteen years I have sworn to get even with heem. That big man there and I broke out of jail three weeks ago and keeled two guards. With our bare hands we keeled them—and were not captured.

"Now we came back here, I determined to keel thees man who sentenced me unless I got a good deal of money. I got a check. He called up hees bank and told them it was all right. I could have gone in town and cashed eet. I would have left the house locked, everybody bound. I would have had days to escape in. He might have starved—but I deed not know about the son. He was supposed to be away with hees mother.

"So eef I am caught—me, a man with a thousand dollars reward for heem, like the big man, and having keeled two guards—I will be dead soon anyhow. I will take a chance in the airplane. Eef I am keeled because eet does not work well—what difference? To you, to be keeled, not to me. Eet will learn you not to interfere."

His expressionless, close-set eyes roved toward the bound man, and on his swarthy face

there was the look of a cat which licks his lips over a tender morsel.

"After you, Meester Judge, with my gun at your side, called up your bank and told them you had done beesiness with me and to cash a check for five thousand dollairs, I was weeling you should leeve. But I cannot now cash eet, and my vengeance—eet is not complete. So I shall keel you."

In that second of frozen horror Rex was utterly convinced that the man fully intended to live up to his placid words. The old man's steady eyes did not waver as the convict lingeringly raised the gun.

"No you won't!"

It was a wild shout from Rex, and the outlaw turned slowly and looked down into the flyer's face.

"And why not?" he asked smoothly.

"Because if you do I won't fly you a foot—you can shoot me or do anything you like, but you're done for as far as escaping goes!"

The outlaw appeared to meditate. Then he said, slowly:

"I would rather—well, we shall see."

Slowly, as though to submit Rex to the

maximum of torture, he trained the gun on the pilot. For what seemed an eternity it remained motionless. Rex was paralyzed with horror. It seemed that he could not move or speak. He had thought that his bluff would prevent the criminal from taking his cold-blooded revenge on the old man, but now he was equally certain that his captor, crazed with the desire for revenge, would rather kill his enemy than take a chance for escape which was at best a desperate one.

With fascinated eyes he saw the man's finger tighten around the trigger. And yet Rex, absolutely numb with fear, still held his nerve. He was not consciously brave—his mind was a chaos, and somehow he had the wild thought that it was all a mightmare—it could not be—

"You ween," breathed the outlaw softly. "Come out to the car!"

As the car lurched out toward the plane, Rex began to figure. And the result of his reckoning was satisfactory, even if it was a desperate expedient. He must get that mail to Cleveland.

So, as they drew up to the ship, white as a ghost-plane he made his suggestion.

"We can take a chance on the prop, if you insist," he stated. "But you'll see for yourself, if you don't now, that it is utterly impossible to give the stick room enough to move freely, or to work the rudder, with two men in the back seat. I can tie you on the fuselage—right there—so you can't fall off, and leave your arms free to handle your gun. You'll be behind me. If that suits you, O.K. If not, shoot now. I'd rather be killed by your bullet than crash into the ground and burn to death."

The icy, unemotional crook required a quick demonstration of the truth of Rex's words. Then he nodded, and Lee had to admire the man's cold nerve as he said:

"There is a rope in the car. Tie me here—around the stomach."

He lay flat on the top of the fuselage, his head even with the rear of the pilot's cockpit. With his gun ever ready, he watched Rex tie him securely.

The occasional flakes of snow could not hurt the propeller any more. Rex was sure, however, that it would vibrate so terrifically, due to the extent to which the sleet had ruined its tips, that it would eventually fly to pieces. The

crook could not blame the pilot for that. If it lasted as far as Cleveland—well, that was a bridge which he did not like to think about too much. He was going to try to land the mail there, regardless of what might happen.

The mail was an even hour late as he gave the ship full gun. He turned around, taxied back, turned again, and then, with throttle wide open once more, sent the ship on its loggy way through the snow.

One thing made a take-off possible—the high wind, into which the ship was headed. It seemed an eternity before it picked up speed, but finally Rex rocked it off the ground just in time to get over the fence. Then he headed northwest—not exactly north, as his passenger had indicated. For Cleveland was northwest.

Apparently the outlaw did not notice that his pilot was heading a few points west of north. With the muzzle of the gun boring into his shoulders, Rex sent the ship on its way, only a hundred feet above the ground. And wide open, so that it vibrated terrifically as the unbalanced propeller whirled dizzily.

It was only a question of time when it would break into pieces, or the continuous vibration

weaken some part of the motor, like the feed line. But although that would be far safer, for his own sake, than to reach Cleveland and put his scheme into operation, Rex hoped with all his heart that it would last that half hour. For the mail must get there.

Soon he picked up a railroad, then another, and then a third, all converging ever so slightly. That meant he was nearing Cleveland. Then, a half hour after he had left the field, the terrifically vibrating ship was laboring through the air. It seemed to be loose in every hinge bolt and connection, but he grimly flew on, hoping that it would not break into pieces beneath him. Occasionally he looked around at the calm, pallid face from which opaque black eyes always met his, unblinking in the terrific air stream which swirled around Rex's body.

He was a thousand feet high as he shot over Cleveland. He picked up the small mail field, with its cleared cinder runway and surrounding hangars. Then he cut the motor, and gestured ahead at the lake.

"We can't make it across there to Canada with this prop!" he yelled.

"If we can't, we weel go down together!"

shouted the uncannily calm passenger. He thrust forward meaningly with the gun.

"Suppose I start down now, and land—if you shoot you'll be dead as surely as I—"

"Do you teenk I hesitate one minute?"

Rex did not. Putting himself into the man's place, with nothing but the electric chair ahead, he thought that he might feel just as did his passenger. And the man had already impressed him unforgettably with his steely coolness.

He still had one more card to play—the one he had really figured on. He twisted as far as his belt would let him, and his eyes bored into his captor's. His right hand was on the edge of the cockpit, his left on the stick, out of sight of his prospective victim. Quickly, without detection, he unstrapped his belt. Then, with startling suddenness he sent the ship down, and tipped it sharply, at the same time, in a vertical bank.

The unthinking reaction he had counted on happened. The man's free hand was gripping the cowling, and in that terrific steep spiral his gun hand instinctively clawed for a hold.

In that second Rex whirled in his seat, and both hands went for the gun.

But the man's great strength foiled him—at least momentarily. Rex could not exert his full strength in his awkward position, and the man kept his hold. His other arm flailed around in a terrific blow for the pilot's head, but his position took away its sting.

The De Haviland was roaring downward like a thing possessed, out of control. There was one last chance to dare—a gamble which meant success or one limp body by itself on the ground, another with the ship.

Rex, holding desperately to the gun with both hands, unmindful of the battering his face was getting, got up and turned around. Only one knee wedged under the cowling kept him from being thrown free of the ship as he did it. He got it under just in time. Then with all the power his desperation engendered in him, he twisted the gun from the man's hand.

Immediately two tremendous arms encircled his body, and with a pressure that seemed resistless slowly lifted his body from the cockpit. The earth was rushing up to meet the diving

ship, and there was no time to waste. With a mighty effort, straining back to get room for force, Lee brought the heavy gun down on the outlaw's head. A sickening thud. Then the arms that would have thrown the pilot clear relaxed around him.

As though fate were endeavoring to batter him into defeat, Rex had no sooner regained control of his ship, just as the tall buildings of the city seemed rising like clutching fingers to tear him, than the propeller ripped into shreds. But he did not care. The tiny field nestling within the city limits was within gliding distance, and with the skill of the born airman in his eyes and hands and feet and the singing of the happy pilot in his heart he brought the Air Mail in.

Two days later, while the newspapers and the service were still singing his praises, he got a letter from Mr. Jason Parks, the ex-judge whose life he had saved:

Coatesville, Ohio
January 23.

Dear Lee:

You may know that there was a reward of $1,000 each for the apprehension of those two

jail breakers, dead or alive. They are both back in prison, and I have asked the privilege of sending you the enclosed official check for $2,000.

Now I am asking for another privilege, that of your friendship—the genuine friendship that takes as generously as it gives. In any case of emergency, great or small, I hope you will call on me for help as willingly as you came to help me. But I will not ask you to promise that until you know me better.

My son George and Mrs. Parks and I are coming to Cleveland soon to see you. Until then, believe me,

Sincerely yours,
Jason Parks.

All in all, probably the happiest as well as the most famous of the flyers who rode the Air Mail ships from Long Island to San Francisco that week was the slim pilot who flew the eastern beat out of Cleveland.

CHAPTER VI

THE PHANTOM BANDIT

As Rex Lee strode across the lobby of the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago on a bright July morning he was frankly worried. For why should the "Big Chief," none other than the assistant postmaster general from Washington in charge of the Air Mail Service, want one of the flyers of the service to call on him at his hotel—and since he did, why should the particular pilot be Rex Lee, youngest of the forty airmen who fly the mails from coast to coast?

The chief was on an inspection tour—he had been out at the field the day before. He had said nothing then.

"Maybe he thought I looked cockeyed at him," Rex reflected as he put in a telephone call to the chief's room.

"Come right up, Lee," came a deep bass voice over the wire, and Rex boarded an elevator without delay.

The chief was alone in the sitting room of

his suite, and opened the door himself. He was a stocky, gray-haired man, and his smile of greeting was comforting to the young flyer.

"Sit down, Lee," he told his subordinate, and Rex subsided into a comfortable chair and threw one long leg over the other. Then he fixed his wide-set blue eyes on his C.O.—he always thought of the men above him as commanding officers because of his term in the army air service—and waited quietly.

"Lee, you got your air training in the army, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Learned something about handling a fighting ship, I suppose?"

"Something—yes, sir."

"Why did you leave the army?"

The chief talked in measured tones, his deep bass rolling forth resonantly. He held his cigar in his hand as he waited for the answer. Rex chuckled.

"To—run a hardware store, sir!" He went on to explain, but the chief interrupted.

"Then the air game got you—"

"I was sick for it, sir. I'd rather fly than to eat—"

"So you got in the air mail," laughed the older man. "Well, here goes. You're probably wondering why you're here. In the first place, do you think you could fly a single-seated pursuit plane for eight straight hours, all night long, from Chicago to Cheyenne, without killing yourself by falling asleep?"

Rex's thin, tanned face plainly reflected his utter surprise. He forgot that he had been worried, and almost failed to remember that he was talking to an assistant postmaster general of the United States.

"Why—yes, sir—I—that is—why, sure I could! Why?"

The chief's square, fleshy face expanded in a wide grin, which speedily grew into a laugh.

"I don't blame you for being surprised, youngster," he chuckled. "Think twice. That's eight hundred and eighty-five miles of flying—"

Rex didn't have to think twice. His mind was racing—racing back to that three thousand miles of sleepless flying Slim Lindley had done. He set his jaw.

"I can do it, sir," he said calmly. He had regained his poise, now.

The chief sobered quickly, and began to talk in forthright sentences, his eyes on the smoke curling upward from his cigar.

"Here's the idea. To-day, after a conference with the division superintendents, I decided that for safety's sake we must put into operation immediately a guard system for the night mail. That is, have a scout ship, equipped with machine guns, escort the mail planes.

"You understand, Lee, what the mail means to the banking interests of this country. Every year there are billions of dollars, literally, which are in transit in the mails from one to six days. And money in the mails draws no interest. The bankers call it the daily float. Consequently, the cutting down of the long trip across the continent to a little over thirty hours by air mail appeals strongly to the bankers. They've been using the air mail consistently since its inception, and will continue to do so. We are justified in demanding rates high enough to pay for adequate protection. To-night, for instance, I happen to know that Moran and Company have sent negotiable securities worth hundreds of thousands of dol-

lars which we are carrying to San Francisco. They're on the way to Chicago now.

"It so happens that among our nineteen night flyers there are no men who have had training as pursuit pilots, except you. So I am going to withdraw you from regular duty for a few weeks, and station you at Cheyenne. Equipment—that is, four MB scout planes, machine guns and ammunition, and a machine gun range—will be ready for your use at Cheyenne within a few days. One by one all our night flyers will be sent to you for training. Shouldn't take over a week to get a man's hand back in on scout ships, and give him a fair amount of practice aiming his ship at a mark on the ground, should it?"

"They're all good flyers, sir, and that ought to be sufficient."

"Now I thought we'd kill two birds with one stone. You've got to get to Cheyenne right away and superintend the construction of the range and the setting up of the ships. So you might as well fly there as go by railroad. Second, it happens that there's a particularly valuable load to-night. So one of the scout planes which we've borrowed temporarily, from the

army, will be flown here from Chanute Field, at Rantoul, this afternoon instead of shipped with the rest to Cheyenne. Third, inasmuch as none of the other men are 'up' on scout planes, it would be inadvisable for them to start getting their hand in again on a night-flying trip after having handled nothing but heavily weighted De Havilands.

"So, if you think you can make the entire trip, you ferry the scout through to Cheyenne tonight, guard the mail on the way, and then dig in out there and turn out the boys as fast as you can. I'll be out there within a few days on this trip, and we'll go more into detail then. By that time you'll have the range ready and the ships set up and be working on your first man—one of the Omaha men. You're only a youngster—think you can do it?"

"Yes, sir!" Rex blazed, his eyes shining. "Why—I'd be tickled to death, sir—and I'll do my best to teach 'em anything I know about air fighting—it isn't much—"

The chief smiled benevolently.

"That's all right. Get plenty of rest last night? Well, take a good nap, anyhow."

He had arisen as he spoke, and held out his

hand. The telephone rang before Rex could get to his feet.

"I'll be on hand, sir," he gulped, surprised at the sudden ending of the interview.

"Sure. Well, happy landings, Lee. Isn't that what you flyers say?"

"Yes, sir. And thank you."

That afternoon Rex shipped his trunk, then lay down for a nap. Furthermore, he fell soundly asleep. His nerves were as an airman's should be, even though his enthusiasm for the air made him look forward to the trip, and his pride in the service and the fact that he had been picked for the job at Cheyenne excited him.

He got to the field well ahead of time, and warmed the three hundred horsepower motor of the shining little pursuit plane which he was to fly. It would make nearly two hundred miles an hour, that sturdy little ship. It was good to sit in a scout again. He watched his instruments like a hawk—oil pressure, air pressure, tachometer, which shows how many times a minute the engine is revolving, and all the other instruments which crowd the dashboard of a plane.

It was working perfectly. The field mechanics had tuned it up since its flight from Rantoul. A little later, Franks, the pilot who was to fly the regular mail ship, showed up and tested his motor out. It was a big ton and a half De Haviland of the old army type, rebuilt for the mail service. In place of the front cockpit there was a closed compartment to carry the mailbags. Then the two airmen stood off by themselves, talking casually, until the plane from Cleveland got in. Rex was razzed good-naturedly at his new position, the flyers addressing him as Professor. Promptly at six-thirty, as the western sky was red with the sunset, the two planes' engines were going and they were taxiing out for the the take-off. The huge beacon light, four hundred and fifty million candle power, was not working as yet, because it was still light. The mechanics on duty stood and watched as Rex gave his little ship the gun, flashed across the field, and pulled back smoothly on the stick. Like a shot the scout zoomed upward, cleared the roofs of the hangars and machine shops by a safe margin, and hummed its way around the airdrome. From his airy perch Rex watched the big four

hundred and fifty horsepower Liberty burst into full cry below, and the heavy mail ship take off.

Steadily the two ships climbed, Rex throttling his motor down to the limit after he had reached eleven thousand feet. He planned to fly a thousand feet higher than the De Haviland, for the higher a pursuit plane is the better it can fight. It was necessary to fly his three hundred horsepower ship well throttled down, for it was an easy fifty miles an hour faster than the loaded mail plane.

As the two ships roared along on their course to Iowa City it was still light, although a high layer of clouds made it a bit darker than is normal for seven o'clock on a July evening. Already the little beacons, set in pasture lots and fields every three miles along the route, were lighted, for they worked automatically. The rays of the sun expanded the "sun valves" in each beacon, thus automatically turning them off. Inversely, when the sun was not visible, the beacons lighted automatically, as do automatic lights of the lighthouses along coasts in desolate parts of the world. The beacons were always placed in fields suitable for forced land-

ings, and there were no less than two hundred and ninety-one of them between Chicago and Cheyenne.

Every twenty-five miles special emergency fields had been constructed, and each, in charge of a caretaker, was equipped with a five million candle power aerial beacon, set on top of a fifty-foot tower. These lights were not yet going.

Rex, his leather helmet strapped tight over his curly hair and his blue eyes glowing softly with enjoyment behind his big goggles, was atingle with subdued excitement. He was very young, and the dim possibility of trouble lent a touch of high adventure to the trip, which would have been adventure enough in itself under ordinary conditions. And now, added to the pride of the service there was the deep satisfaction of having been picked for the job —to guard the air mail from Chicago to Cheyenne.

Dusk was settling as the two ships dropped down over the field in Iowa City, and the lights of the town went winking out. The great aerial beacon at the field was thrown down until it flooded the ground for the landing, and

the floodlights on hangar roofs and repair shops were going full blast, as were the lights outlining the field. Fifteen minutes to transfer the mail to the next De Haviland, manned by "Pinky" Weathers, and to refuel and inspect Rex's plane, and they were off once more, circling upward into the darkness above the light-studded mass which was the city.

Straight as a string the planes hurtled along on the way to Omaha. The beacons at the emergency fields, revolving around the horizon once every ten seconds, and visible for more than fifty miles, blazed a highway of light for the planes to follow, interspersed by the tiny flickers of the small lights. Somehow the black night made anything seem possible, and Rex settled down into steady watchfulness. His eyes would scan his instruments briefly, and then sweep the horizon for signs of the exhaust flame of any strange ship. A thousand feet below him the exhaust pipes of the mail plane sent blue-red banners of flame through the night, and the De Haviland seemed like a monster of the darkness, breathing fire. Far below—two miles below—lighted railroad trains crept across the country, and the lights

of the towns along the route turned them into miniature fairylands standing out against the night. Automobile headlights seemed like fireflies, flitting through the gloom.

So tense was Lee, and wrapped so completely in his work, that it was a surprise to him when Omaha sprawled in blazing splendor ahead. In sweeping spirals the ships circled downward over the field, outlined in fire below them. Again the huge beacon's lights were thrown downward, to help the ships land, the mail was transferred, and Rex's ship attended to. It had been running like a clock, so far, so he let mechanics attend to it and got himself a cup of coffee. The field was heavily guarded, as were all the mail fields, particularly at night.

When he returned from the restaurant, he fond a knot of mechanics and flyers around the mail ship. A tall, broad-shouldered pilot was strapping on his helmet. Rex quickened his pace. That wasn't "Hippo" Parks—the stout little master pilot who was scheduled for the trip from Omaha to North Platte. In fact, he was a stranger to Rex himself.

Grayley, in charge of the Omaha station, spotted Rex as he approached.

"Lee, meet Baertiz, who'll make the run with you. Parks didn't show up, for some reason."

Baeritz shook hands with a strong grip, and when he smiled a greeting his lean, dark, strong-looking face lighted up oddly. In repose his dark eyes and square-jawed countenance had seemed harsh.

"Glad to know you," he stated. "They tell me I'm to be one of your students out in Cheyenne."

"Three minutes!" yelled Grayley, and the flyers hurried off toward their ships. There was an atmosphere of suppressed excitement around the airdrome. The night mail almost invariably had a valuable cargo, and the presence of the first armed guard ship seemed to open new vistas of adventure to a breed of men to whom excitement is the breath of life.

Promptly on schedule time they roared across the field on the take-off, down the lane of light cast by the beacon. In a few minutes they had left Omaha behind, and were rushing along through the night two miles above the sleeping earth. It was very cold, and Rex drew his leather coat more closely about him. Without ceasing his eyes swept the blackness on all

sides of him. For once he was unconscious of the ethereal beauty below him, a black mass relieved here and there by winking lights. Straight ahead of them three of the great beacons could be seen, throwing great shafts of light up into the sky to guide them. The roaring motor was now gradually deafening the young pilot—already he had spent more than four hours in that mad rush across the continent.

Suddenly he tensed in his seat. They were halfway between Omaha and North Platte, and below them the earth was merely denser blackness with not a light to show the whereabouts of a house. Fifteen miles ahead was the beacon which showed an emergency station, but otherwise the earth seemed deserted. And to northward, he thought he had seen the flame of an exhaust pipe.

Steadily he peered through the night, and a brief, excited bark, inaudible even to himself, escaped his lips as he caught it again. It was merely a brief red glow against the sky.

A moment more sufficed to tell him that it was a ship, speeding along at a terrific rate on an angling course which would intersect

that of the mail ship and its escort. There was only one plausible explanation for a ship of terrific speed flying at that hour—the mail was about to be robbed, and the fact that a ship was in the air at that speed flying without lights meant that a daring man was in it.

The navigation lights on wing tips and tail of the De Haviland made an easy guide—it would be impossible to miss it. Probably that other ship had been waiting—

On and on it came, and Rex's nervous fingers were caressing the machine gun control on his stick. He did not know what to do, exactly. He could not shoot without some definite indication that the other ship was bent on robbery—better watch and wait. On the other hand, it was very possible that the other pilot had not seen the guard ship, but with eyes intent on the lighted De Haviland, was planning to shoot the mail ship down without delay. Poor Baeritz, down there, might be a living sacrifice.

Rex pulled himself together. Better hover a thousand feet above the D. H., prepared to rush downward with his guns spitting fire at the first move the other ship made at the mail plane.

Steadily he watched the nearing ship. Then he noticed a surprising thing. The other ship was now higher than he was himself—and Rex was far above the lighted mail ship. The other ship had noticed him—and was climbing rapidly to get the jump. Probably figured the pilot of the scout might not have seen him.

The throttle of the little MB went all the way forward, and the motor went into full cry. In as steep a climb as the ship would stand Rex sent it upward. He *must not* be lower than his opponent.

He glanced down at the De Haviland, and for a moment he was literally frozen into immobility. For the mail plane was diving downward at the emergency field. Why did he not go on ahead with the mail—for the mail *must* arrive on time. Had his motor gone bad?

Then the explanation came to him. Probably Baeritz figured that if he, Rex, should be knocked down by the enemy, the raider could easily catch the De Haviland and then the mail —and Baeritz—would be absolutely at the skyman's mercy. Baeritz could make a fight on the ground, to save it. If Rex won, he could take off again. Rex paid a tribute to the tall

pilot's common sense, despite the pounding excitement which had him tensed to the breaking point.

The other ship was within a quarter of a mile of him now, and with leaping exultation Rex saw that he himself was higher, and increasing his advantage every moment. Head on, the two ships sped toward each other, Rex leaning far over the side to watch.

Then the other pilot made an error. Five hundred yards—too far—from Rex he zoomed upward a trifle, pointing the nose of his ship at the MB. He was very dimly discernible through the darkness. Automatically Rex banked, fast as lightning, just as he saw daggers of fire pour from the nose of the bigger ship ahead of him.

Like a flash, Rex banked around, and as he got his bead, temporarily, he let fly a burst of bullets. There was no perceptible effect. Then, in a mighty zoom, the MB shot upward and over the other craft, which sped below him.

At the top of the zoom Rex kicked it off into a wing turn. The nose dropped, and in a terrific dive the ship changed direction until he was pursuing the other. But the other man

was no fool. He, too, had turned like a flash. But he was lower. His course carried him back under Rex. The mail pilot jammed the stick all the way ahead, until he was in a practically vertical nose dive. In the split-second during which the other ship was below him he fired. And he thought he saw the bullets take effect on the tail of the craft below.

Gradually he pulled out of his dive, and used the excess speed to send the MB almost straight up into the air. Farther and farther back came the stick, until the scout was curving around in the start of a loop. Just as it was coming on its back, with stick and rudder the young pilot performed that little known and very effective fighting maneuver—the real Immelman turn. The ship turned from its back right side up, on the top of a loop, which left it hundreds of feet higher than it had been before, and flying in the opposite direction.

As he righted his ship, Rex could not find his adversary for a moment. Then he saw the ship, five hundred feet below him, zooming up at him and firing. Apparently the shots were abortive, for the little scout did not falter.

There came a second when the other ship

hung, stalled on the top of the zoom. Before the pilot could regain his speed Rex had done a fast renversement, and was diving down at him, his guns shooting a hail of lead through the flying propeller. Then the ship below wing-turned out of danger.

Rex was almost beside himself with fury. That had been a perfect opportunity—could it be that his long layoff from aerial fighting had ruined his eye and flying ability? He should have made a hit—

Then he saw that the other ship was lying a bit peculiarly—as though the controls were partly out of order or the pilot, perhaps wounded. It was a two-seated fighting plane, on the general order of the improved Le Pere, he thought. There was only one man in it. Again he swooped down, but the other flyer seemed to pull himself together and maneuvered out of Rex's line of fire.

For a half minute the two monsters of the air fought, Rex relentlessly on the trail of the other. They twisted and turned through the night like living things, and every few seconds, as a brief opportunity came, Rex fired.

Finally the other ship was caught again in a stall, after it had zoomed upward for a shot at the bottom of the MB. Again Rex flashed out of danger, and again he swept downward in a full power dive. Every strut was quivering with the speed, and the vibration seemed about to tear the frail single-seater to pieces. But a rain of machine gun fire poured from the nose of the MB at the target below.

Slowly the nose of the other ship dropped as Rex pulled up, careful to get out out of line of fire. Then it went into a slow tailspin. Faster and faster the crippled ship screwed downward through the air, the motor still going.

Rex did not wait. Below him the De Haviland could be seen, still making the emergency field. In a power dive the scout chased after it, at easily double the rate of speed which a pilot would dare to dive the heavily weighted, rather frail De Haviland. Flying automatically, he kept his eyes on his victim.

It was impossible to tell how near the earth was, so it was with an effect of stunning surprise that Rex saw it crash. In an instant a living mass of flame burst forth. Rex's thin,

bronzed face was curiously old, and there was tragedy in his clear blue eyes, as he watched. But it had been a necessity. As he hurtled toward the field, which the De Haviland was now circling, he was wondering who the mystery flyer was, whom he had never seen and never would see save, perhaps, as a heap of charred bones.

The tremendous five million candle power light was playing over the mail plane as it landed. The fact that Baeritz had circled the field proved that it had not been a forced landing. Why did he not take off right away?

Any exultation over his recent victory, or reaction from the terrific strain, was forgotten as a thousand possibilities swarmed in Rex's abnormally clear and fast-working mind. There must be confederates on the ground somewhere. That had been a two-seated ship with only one man in it. They might be speeding toward the field now to rob the mail on the ground. There might be something very minor, like one missing cylinder, wrong with the D. H.—

The beacon played over him for his landing. That is, it guided him down until he was within

a hundred feet of the field. He could see Baeritz standing beside his plane, watching. The boundary lights were all going around the field. The solitary caretaker was on the job—a good sign—

Then, without warning, every light went out—boundary lights, floodlights and the great beacon itself. It left Rex in pitch darkness, shooting for a field he could not see, to land on an earth which was merely a vague mass below him.

With all the skill a thousand hours in the air can give a born flyer he felt his way downward. He must clear that invincible boundary fence and land safely.

In that brief moment of tense strain his mind automatically found a solution. The caretaker had been bribed, or else put out of the way and one of the gang put in his place. Baeritz must be in on the robbery. They had cut the lights to make him crash, hoping to kill him and get him out of the way.

Suddenly it seemed that the ground rose up to meet him. He pulled up fast, but not fast enough. The wheels hit with terrific force, and bounced the scout high in the air. But Rex

handled it, nosing over quickly to keep from stalling, and dropping five feet straight down, finally, in a perfect stall landing. And then the lights all came on again.

Of course it was possible that the farm-lighting set, which supplied power for the emergency station, might have gone bad for a moment. Rex, however, took no chances. As Baeritz came running toward him he hopped out of the cockpit and got behind the plane.

"Isn't that the devil!" Baeritz called as he ran. "Set went bad all of a sudden, I guess. Great work, Lee! Got 'im, did you?"

Rex, in the bright illumination cast by the down-turned beacon, watched the big pilot narrowly as he approached. The man's Colt was still in the holster at his hip. Rex's was half out of the holster, but that fact was hidden by the ship.

"What's the matter? Why don't you take off? There must be confederates on the ground somewhere here! It's a wonder they're not at the field right now!" said Rex in a rush of words.

"There was—one man!" Baeritz said easily.

"Huh?"

Rex was utterly astounded at the grinning pilot's casual remark.

"When those lights went out I suddenly got it through my dumb head that there must be someone on the ground, and that he was here at the field, and that he must have put the caretaker away and be handling the lights. So I sneaked up under cover of the darkness, and got him. He's out for the count up in the tower now.

"I pulled a bone not taking off right away but when I saw you coming down I figured the other bird had winged you some way and that you had to land. Thought I'd wait and see."

Rex was utterly ashamed of his suspicions as Baeritz walked around the ship. The big pilot lit a cigaret and then said:

"Well, let's hop off, eh? Pretty good night's work we've—"

Without any warning whatever, he ceased talking and his fist flashed toward Rex's jaw with the speed of a striking snake. Had Rex not been as quick as a panther he would have been felled like an ox. As it was, his body went

downward, just in time to escape the blow, and in a perfect football tackle he hit Baeritz's knees and upset him.

Without an instant's delay Rex tried to squirm free, for he knew he was no match physically for his powerful opponent. He almost tore loose, and had his gun half out of the holster, when Baeritz got a grip with one hand.

For a few seconds Rex fought like a wild cat. His strength was momentarily superhuman. He fought one arm free, and at the expense of six inches of skin off his elbow got his gun out. Before the heaving Baeritz could stop him he had pressed the muzzle to the pilot's arm and fired.

Baeritz subsided limply as Rex staggered to his feet, panting. In his hand he held the other flyer's Colt, too, and with his stained leather clothing, gleaming goggles and tight-fitting helmet, with a gun in each hand as he looked wildly around for any other opponent, he seemed like some demon of the night, fighting single-handed in the depths of a deserted country.

The Liberty in the mail ship was idling

softly, as was the Wright motor in his own. He was morally certain that the men at the beacon, up on top of the fifty-foot tower, were confederates of Baeritz and the dead pilot. Baeritz had fooled him badly. He could not fight them all—and besides, the main thing was to get the mail to North Platte on time. The spot was deserted, and an alarm sent out from North Platte would undoubtedly result in the capture of whomever was up there, shrouded by the darkness.

All these things passed through his mind in a few seconds. Then, like magic, every light on the field went out, and all was inky blackness. In an instant his decision was made, and he was on the dead run toward the idling Liberty.

He reached it in a few giant strides, and a second later was in the cockpit. He heard shouts as he turned on the motor, and headed down the field taxiing as swiftly as he could with safety. There were shots, and shouts to him to halt. It was so dark he had to strain his eyes to see the boundary fence. Just in time he swept around, headed down the field, and gave the four hundred and fifty horsepower

engine full throttle. Twelve mighty cylinders burst into a Gargantuan roar, and the ship trundled through the inky blackness with ever-gathering speed. As it came even with the tower there was a hail of bullets, but he passed through them safely.

There were a few wild, tense seconds when the ship hurled itself along toward the unseen obstacles ahead. All he could do was take off the second the ship had flying speed, and trust to luck. With the instinct of a born flyer he sensed the first moment when flying speed had been gathered, and rocked the De Haviland off the ground. Smoothly he sent it upward, and had the satisfaction of seeing the fence, a vague bulk in the gloom, pass a safe twenty feet below him. With the great fingers of light piercing the sky ahead from the other emergency fields, and the tiny beacons in pasture lots and fields helping show the way, he opened the Liberty wide and without wasting time to get altitude, roared along with the night mail.

Then the earth seemed to lighten, and he turned in his seat. The field behind him was ablaze with light, and he saw, lined against it, the swift little scout he had been flying before,

rising from the ground and pointing toward him. Baeritz had regained consciousness, it must be, and was on his trail. And the scout was fifty miles an hour faster than the De Haviland.

Grimly he set to his task. North Platte was a hundred miles or so ahead. Nose down like a race horse flattened for the stretch run, the D. H. did all it could under the skilful guidance of its young pilot. Minute after minute, less than five hundred feet above the sleeping earth, the great ship literally hurled itself along above tiny villages, towns with lighted streets, steaming railroad trains, country roads gleaming palely like silver in the darkness.

But the pursuing scout drew ever closer, like some Nemesis that could not be lost. The flame of its exhaust became visible behind. Rex thought of landing on an emergency field—but the scout with its machine guns could rake the ground and kill every living thing before landing. On the other hand, the De Haviland was helpless in the air—without guns, and hard to maneuver in comparison with the single-seater. So Rex, leaning forward in his seat, flew grimly for his life.

He was startled to see that the De Haviland, with its motor flying wide open, had actually gained altitude. It was nearly a thousand feet high when the scout had approached within five hundred yards. And North Platte was still forty miles away.

Practically certain death crept ever closer. Yard by yard the MB ate up the distance between the two planes. Finally, five hundred feet higher than the mail plane, it was only the same distance in the rear. And with a sinking heart Rex saw it nose over, and start its dive.

There started the greatest flying achievement of Rex Lee, and one of the greatest a pilot of the air mail or any other service has ever achieved. For a full minute, twisting and turning like a tiger at bay, Rex handled his great, clumsy ship so skilfully that Baeritz could not hit him. Baeritz was not the pilot Rex was.

But it was inevitable that in the wild diving, zooming and banking of that struggle in the darkness the ships should lose altitude, particularly the De Haviland. Nearer and nearer it came to the ground—and a sure wreck, and then sure death, if the crash did not do it, from the raking machine gun fire of the scout.

Rex, white-faced and taut, had resigned himself to his fate when he noticed that the scout was maneuvering with less and less precision and speed. It seemed that something must be the matter with it. Then a possible explanation leaped into his mind, and he flew with renewed courage and daring. He had wounded Baeritz—was the tall, mocking outlaw weakening?

The chances were ten to one that Rex was right. Anyway, when the De Haviland was only two hundred feet above the ground, the scout, a hundred feet higher, flew along level a moment, and then the nose dropped. Faster and faster it dove toward the ground, motor full on. Then there came a crash which Rex could hear above the roar of the Liberty, and the second grisly funeral pyre was lighted on the trail of the night mail.

The Liberty seemed to roar louder, the cylinders to fire in more even rhythm, and the ground to stream away behind with increased speed as Rex sent his huge craft on its way, to bring the mail into North Platte twenty-five minutes late and gasp out his story to the wildly excited air men gathered to meet him.

By the time Jack Norris was on his way to Cheyenne the alarm was out for the unknown confederate who had been back there at the deserted field where Rex had fought his fight on the ground.

At six next morning he was captured, and before noon he had confessed. There were only three men in the plot—Baeritz, with an unimpeachable former record in the army, who had joined the service to wait for a big shipment of securities; Harwood, the dead flyer who had fought Rex ship to ship and gun to gun; and Jason, the man who told the tale. He had taken the caretaker captive.

A little later it was developed that Baeritz, who by pure chance was reserve pilot on the night the big shipment came through, had knocked Hippo Parks on the head while that stout young gentleman was on the way to the field, bound and gagged him, and put him away in a safe hiding place from which he was dragged, half-dead, the next day. It had been planned that Baeritz be merely the source of information.

Rex got a two-weeks vacation with full pay, including a trip to Washington with all ex-

penses paid. While there the assistant postmaster general presented him to the postmaster general, and the postmaster general brought him up to a big white mansion set in a green lawn, and presented him to an aide and then the three of them met the secretary to the President; and then a few minutes later a small, silent man who had been a farm boy in New England shook hands with him, and Rex heard the President of the United States say:

"The country is proud of you, Lee!"

CHAPTER VII

SPECIAL MISSION

Rex Lee forgot his acrimonious argument with Norris—an argument which had been assuming more serious dimensions every hour of the trip from New York to Washington—and concentrated his entire attention on the chief. The chief was the assistant postmaster general who headed the Air Mail service, and he greeted the two pilots he had summoned from Hazelhurst Field with a genial smile and a warm hand clasp.

Tall, thin, black-haired Lee's blue eyes were sparkling with anticipation. Not every day in the week did two Air Mail pilots get summoned to Washington. Norris, though, big and deliberate and sullen, sat down and merely waited, his heavy-lidded gaze resting unwaveringly on the chief's face. Funny about Norris, Rex was thinking for the hundredth time. That face of his, scarred by countless airplane wrecks into almost a caricature of a human countenance,

was not the thing that repelled the eager, reckless, devil-may-care Lee—it was the man's know-it-all attitude about flying. Of course he had flown overseas in the war, and then gone to the Kosciusko Squadron in Poland, and then instructed in Japan—but that stuff about knowing all there was to be known—

"Briefly, gentleman," the chief broke into his thoughts, "I have called you here to ask you—not to order you—to make between you a trip over the Air Mail route from coast to coast, in special planes. You will be carrying papers so important that they cannot wait for the departure of the regular Air Mail ship from New York at ten to-morrow morning. It is safe to say that no airplane in history will have carried so important a cargo as yours. The greatest haste is imperative. At San Francisco a federal agent, Mr. Cowles, will take your papers and dispatch them to their destination. The fastest ship available on the Pacific will have steam up, waiting."

Rex was leaning forward tensely, drinking in every deliberate word. His thin, weather-bronzed face with its aquiline nose and humorously quirked mouth reflected the delight those

words gave him—and something more serious. Anything for excitement—that was the restless Lee all over—but now there was a weight of import in the chief's words that made the mere prospect of the trip seem small and unimportant.

"Word for the necessity for these papers' being made out and dispatched was not received until a few hours ago—at eleven this morning. Every moment counts. Cables are doing all possible, but these papers must clinch matters. It is safe to say that many thousand of dollars a minute will come out of the Government's pocket for every moment lost, to say nothing of more serious results."

Rex, his level blue eyes glowing softly, glanced over at Norris. Somehow the pilot's scarred face did not reflect satisfaction, but his eyes, one of them drawn down by a scar, were glowing dully.

"Rather than disrupt the entire mail service schedule—and we're badly off on the Chicago and West Coast Divisions now for planes and men—I decided to ask two pilots, in special two-passenger ships, to make the thirty-five hour trip continuously, one sleeping and resting

while the other flies. You'll have to fly in the dark from Cleveland to Chicago; from Chicago to Cheyenne, of course, you'll have the benefit of the night lights and fields. Lightly loaded as you'll be, I think you can make the trip in thirty hours. I will not order you to do it —we can get army pilots from Bolling Field— but I strongly urge you to, for your country's sake and the honor of the Mail Service—"

"Gosh, I'll be tickled to death, sir!" blazed the eager Lee, a wide grin on his face.

He saw Norris cast a disgusted, contemptuous look at him, as though sneering at the boyish eagerness of the younger and more brilliant pilot. Rex flushed a bit, but the chief smiled appreciatively.

"There are several reasons why I picked you two," he went on slowly. "You are veterans of the service, and exceptional flyers, and more than that, you have both served on both eastern and western divisions at one time or another; so you are fairly familiar with the whole route. Norris, how about you?"

Rex couldn't believe his eyes when the big, wide-shouldered adventurer hesitated. For a few seconds Norris sat with his shaggy head

bent and his eyes on the floor. Then, as though throwing off a burden that was weighing him down, his shoulders went back and his head came up.

"I'll do it, sir," he said, his deep, harsh voice pitched in low tones. "When do we start?"

"The papers will be delivered to you at Bolling Field at two-thirty, twenty minutes from now. The State Department is working on them and they will be ready on schedule. From here to Chicago you will use one of General Mallory's special De Havilands, loaned for the occasion. His crew has it in first-class shape always. At Chicago a specially prepared De Haviland, on which the mechanics are probably working now, will be ready for you, flown from Rantoul for this purpose. At Cheyenne, another De Haviland, looked over with particular thoroughness, will also be ready for you. There will be hot coffee and food at each Air Mail stop so that you can have it when you want it. Flying clothes will be given you at Bolling, and special winter equipment for the Cheyenne-Frisco lap will be ready. Lose no time—re-

member that minutes count. Good luck and God bless you, boys!"

He shook hands with them, and there was something deep in his eyes that completed the transformation of Rex Lee from a careless, devil-may-care youngster who flew the Air Mail for the fun of it into a level-eyed, serious servant of his country. That look of calm competence which was the result of a thousand dangers surmounted and thousand emergencies met and overcome was to the fore now, and the slim youngster's face was serious and composed.

At that his serious face covered something within him that wanted to shout. Here, at last, was his chance to do a Slim Lindley stunt—the chance he had wanted for a year and a half. And it wasn't the glory Rex craved—it was the thrill, the tremendous satisfaction he'd get out of a good job well done!

A car was awaiting them in front of the mountainous government building, and the two climbed into it without a word. The chauffeur had barely started, though, when Rex burst into speech which he could contain no longer.

"What do you suppose those papers are, Ralph?" he asked excitedly. "Gosh, they must be important to run a special 2800-mile trip for 'em! How'll we work it—two hours on and two off, or take turns flying laps, or—"

"Listen, Lee," Norris broke in, and somehow it seemed that his rugged face was pale and drawn as his eyes met Lee's. "I'll tell you how we'll work it. You fly over the level country between here and Cleveland. I'll take her over the Alleghenies around Bellefonte, and again on the night-flying to Chicago and from Chicago until dawn, wherever we are. Then you can take her over level country again, and I'll fly her from Cheyenne over the mountains. You can take her from the Sacramento Valley into Frisco—"

"What do you mean?" blazed Rex. "I fly about one quarter of the time, when there's good forced landing fields, and you fly all the hard stuff?"

"Yes, and if there's a forced landing or the motor cuts out or anything, whether you're flying or not, I take the stick and make the landing!"

For a second the raging Rex could scarcely

speak. A thousand words crowded for utterance at the same time. For a taut five seconds the two flyers faced each other like crouched beasts. Norris was insulting Rex's flying, that raging pilot was thinking—belittling his ability to handle a ship under bad conditions!

Finally the words came, and a blistering torrent of speech flowed from the overwrought Rex's lips.

"No man ever took the stick from me," he finished, glaring into Norris' hot eyes, "and no one ever will! We'll fly alternate laps, that's what we'll do, and if you make a move to take the stick from me I'll crown you with a wrench, that's what I'll do, and you can make up your mind—"

"You listen to me! I've flown four times as much you have, and you won't catch me risking my neck on your flying when I've got myself to depend on!"

For a second Rex did not know what to do. It was a showdown—and duty so important that it could not even be told to them was just ahead. Then, with a snap, his mind was made up. Norris wasn't the only flyer in the world, and he, Rex, was not compelled to give up the

most sacred tenet tradition has written into the airman's creed: that the pilot is master of his own ship.

Fighting for control, he forced himself to speak slowly.

"Norris, you and I have never been friends, but that isn't the question now. I'm going to fly that ship my share of the time according to orders, and when I'm flying, I'm flying it. I don't relish flying with another man any more than you do, but I won't interfere and neither will you. And if you don't like it say so, and phone the Chief from the field, and I'll get an army flyer in two minutes! Just take it or leave it!"

For a full half minute of tightening supense he waited. What in the name of all that was holy was ailing Norris? He was like a crazy man. Somehow Rex was uncomfortable as he watched that drawn face—it seemed as though Norris were going through torment. He'd hesitated, back there in the office, too—

"You win!" barked Norris suddenly, and to the uncomfortable, more normal Rex it seemed that the words were like a self-pronounced sen-

tence of death to his companion. In a new rush of humiliated anger Rex's wrath swept away his temporary astonishment. What right had any living man to question his flying ability? He'd never failed to get the mail through, had he?

Well, that was that, anyway. And as the white hangars of Bolling Field came in view and he saw the shining yellow-winged, blue-bodied De Haviland Bluebird awaiting them he forgot his feud with Norris, and a great rush of proud feeling swept over him. He had been chosen for this duty, and the service which he loved and risked his life for was to have a new and glorious page written down into its matchless history.

Three quiet, granite-faced secret service men were waiting, and a steel box, heavily padlocked, was given into their keeping. The great twelve-cylinder Liberty was idling gently, warmed and ready.

"I'll take the first lap," grated Norris, his face a mask of sullen disgust, and in two minutes, with Norris in the front cockpit of the dual control ship—full set of controls in each

cockpit, as in all army ships—they were rushing across the ground on the start of their wild dash to the Pacific.

Less than two hours later they were landing beside the hangar at the Bellefonte Field, and ten minutes thereafter Rex was at the stick, holding the nose of his plane down while it roared across the field on the take-off. He had been thinking, all the way from Washington, about the contents of that box—what vast affairs depended on them, and in him there was a swelling sense of responsibility and deep, inarticulate satisfaction such as he had never known. Those millions of people below could not know that their welfare was being watched by those airmen high above them, but he didn't care. It was contentment enough to have the knowledge locked deep in his own heart.

As the ship reared and bucked a bit beneath the clouds over the Alleghenies, he felt Norris' hand on the stick time after time, but always he took it away quickly. Then, an hour out of Cleveland, with dusk falling rapidly, the ship went hurtling into a far-flung line of storm. The rain stung and pricked like millions of needles, and like magic the ground disap-

peared from sight. Rex, strained and alert, eased the ship down from three thousand feet, and with his goggles clouded and his face enduring what seemed to be unendurable torture, he fought through the rain. They'd have to land in Cleveland—

Four times Norris moved the stick as Rex steepened the dive, and once Rex had to shake it viciously to get control again. That fool Norris couldn't control himself at all, it seemed! What was the matter with him? It was desperate work, sure enough, with the ground out of sight, but Lee was pilot.

Two hundred feet off the ground, the earth came vaguely into view. For ten minutes they rushed along through the twilight and the storm, perilously low if anything happened. Then they flashed out of the rain, and far ahead, just visible, were the lights of the suburbs of Cleveland and slowly moving lights of ships on Lake Erie. Rex's tension eased, and he wiped his goggles for the millionth time and felt of his raw face. The April air was chill, now, and it was totally dark. Cleveland was ablaze with light, and the field at the Martin factory was lighted brilliantly for their

landing. As Rex maneuvered the ship down, turning on the specially installed navigation lights on each wing tip, he saw Norris leaning forward, as though utterly unable to keep still. It got on Rex's nerves, somehow. He leveled out a bit too high as the ship swooped toward the ground, and when he landed it bounced. He heard a yell and when the D. H. came to rest the older man was leaning over his cockpit.

"A hot night-flyer you are!" he exploded.

Rex swung the ship around and taxied toward the mechanics who were running toward the ship, and did not answer. It hadn't been such a bad landing, but he'd rather have lost a finger than do anything wrong with that sour nut looking on and sneering!

They did not exchange a word as they bolted hot pork and beans and coffee, and in twenty minutes Norris was sending the ship through the darkness toward Chicago. Never to his dying day would Rex forget that lap—the flat plains, dotted with towns like jewels, invisible below them, and sure injury, perhaps death, if the motor cut out.

No one could tell where to land below now,

and as the ship rushed through the night Rex was tense and strained and unable to rest. He had to admit that Norris was a beautifully smooth flyer, but there is no prejudice in all humanity so great as that of the average experienced flyer against flying with anyone else but himself at the stick when danger lurks near. With his ears never missing a beat of the rhythmically running Liberty as he waited for the sputter that would mean a blind rush into the unknown darkness, it seemed to Rex that the trip would never end.

His body slumped weakly as the myriad lights of South Chicago appeared in blazing strands ahead, and ten minutes later the D. H. had left Chicago behind and was circling over the Air Mail Field at Maywood, with its white-bordered cinder paths running in all four directions and its night-landing lights blazing white to meet them.

It was close to midnight, and seventeen hundred miles of flying was still before them if that precious package was to reach its destination. Somehow Rex didn't care to talk to anyone—curious, half-fearful mechanics, working like beavers, or even Garry Thomas, an old ac-

quaintance. He and Norris did not speak, either, and it seemed to the restive, already fatigued Lee there was something sinister in their silence. They were eating, and it was like a shock when Norris suddenly laid down his cup and said gruffly:

"Suppose you fly Chicago-Cheyenne—that's nine hundred miles—and I'll sleep. Then I'll fly Cheyenne-Frisco."

Rex leaped to his feet. There it was again—Chicago-Cheyenne was a cinch, and Cheyenne-Frisco the most deadly part of the whole 2800-mile trip. Another direct insult to his flying—

Then it seemed, as he looked at the contorted face and glittering eyes of his companion, that the feeling that had swept over him back there in Washington engulfed him again. That box must get through—and what was a man's individual pride compared to the importance of that mission? Norris was in terrible shape—there was something horrible in his face and eyes. He was like a man strained to the breaking point. For once in his life the impulsive, brilliant youngster conquered himself.

"Norris, I don't know what's ailing you; so

I'll let your knocks about my flying go. And I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll be hanged if I don't fly my full half of this trip but I'll meet you more than halfway. I'll fly Chicago to North Platte, and you can take her from there to Reno. That'll give you nearly three-quarters of the tough flying, and I'll ride with you. I'll take her from Reno in—half of it over good country."

It was like pulling teeth to do it—he was being put in the position of a raw amateur—

"All right," barked Norris, and it seemed that his big body relaxed a little.

Five minutes later Rex was circling above the brightly lit field, and at fifteen hundred feet he sent the new De Haviland rushing on its way through the night. Level country now—great plains and low-rolling hills once in a while. At the emergency landing fields, every twenty-five miles, great five million candle-power lights guided him on his way, from the tops of fifty-foot towers. At Iowa City and Omaha and North Platte five hundred million-candle-power beacons could be picked up for nearly one hundred miles. Ordinarily it was a cinch trip, with good, lighted landing fields so

close, but that night it seemed as though there were something sinister riding with the two motionless, helmeted figures who sat like demons of the night as they flashed across a shadowed, sleeping world. More important than possible emergencies was the fact that even a safe landing would be a disaster—that priceless cargo they carried must get through. So to Rex the six-hundred-mile trip, with stops at Iowa City, Omaha, and North Platte, was one long strain. The ceaseless drum of the motor was at once the sweetest music in the world and the most nerve-shattering clatter his tortured ears had ever borne. In back of him Norris was not sleeping—he was taut and strained too.

A group of curious, half-frightened men met them at North Platte. As at the other fields, it seemed that they were amazed, and vaguely frightened, at the mysterious import of that cargo that had caused wires to flash across the country to every station, ordering special preparations. They worked in tense silence. It was dawn at North Platte, and Norris, silent as the grave, climbed in the front cockpit and sent the ship hurtling on its way toward

Cheyenne, over limitless grain farms which stretched away to the foot of the Rockies.

At Cheyenne, hopping-off place for the most deadly stretch of country in the wide world, it seemed that the field men were far from themselves. Every day that trip was a deadly one which made men's hearts skip a beat as the mail left for Frisco, but this mystery ship from the East, with its haggard, drawn pilots rushing across the continent on a mission of transcendent importance—

"We've been working on the ship all night, sir, and I know she's as fit as hands can make her!" the chief mechanic assured Norris earnestly, and in the silence of the other mechanics there was a spirit of eager hope mixed with unconquerable fear that perhaps there was some weakness they had not found.

Norris was himself, now. After three cups of coffee and four eggs he spoke to Rex pleasantly, but it was Lee's turn to be far from himself. The strain was telling on him, and he was brooding on the fact that he had been forced to give up his prerogatives—to ride as a passenger when good flying was needed even to keep in the air. The strain was telling—

he was jumpy and nervous, and there was pounding ceaselessly through his head one thought: the ship must get through.

Cheyenne, Rock Springs, Elko, Reno—how well he knew that deadly country, but never before had the trip been so unbearable. Before there had been the mail to think of, and his own life. Now there was more than that, and his sunken eyes glittered with a light that was half-madness as the ship seemed to crawl over the Laramie Range, the Great Divide Basin, the Wasatch Mountains, Salt Lake City.

Flying at ten thousand feet, both airmen knew that the peaks were often less than five hundred feet below the ship, their snow-flecked sides dropping off into bottomless canyons and forbidding cliffs. Clouds were below them most of the time, and out of Salt Lake City barren cliffs rose out of a desert which was like the creation of a diseased brain, infinitely horrible in its lifeless ugliness.

An uninhabitable, sandy waste; then the welcome Truckee River and some green on the terrain below foreshadowed Reno. For ten minutes into Reno the exhausted Rex dropped into a coma. He had to be shaken awake, to

find himself on the field and looking up into Norris' eyes.

"You're in no shape to fly the Sierra Nevadas—I'll fly her in—"

"You will not!" screamed the overwrought Lee, and in a trice he was out of the plane, his face thrust into Norris' and his fists clenched. "By the mighty, say another word and I'll lick you until you can't even ride as a passenger!"

For a second Norris seemed about to leap on him. Frayed nerves were taking their toll.

The presence of others stopped them, though, and suddenly the two relaxed. Norris turned away, his face like a thundercloud, and Rex wiped tears from his eyes—tears of hysteria.

He got hold of himself, though, and when Young, the superintendent, gripped his hand and said:

"An hour ahead of schedule, Lee—good luck!" he was able to smile a twisted smile.

The two airmen put on the heaviest of winter clothing, now, and covered their faces with chamois-skin protectors. Norris' hands were trembling as he adjusted his helmet and goggles, but Rex seemed strangely calm. He sent the ship roaring on its way with a steady

hand on the stick, and out of Reno climbed steadily upward to thirteen thousand feet as the De Haviland, its motors roaring defiance to the approaching Sierras, carried the ship along at a hundred and ten miles an hour.

For a full hour he fought the sucking air currents and wild wind eddies which strove to destroy them above those majestic, deadly peaks. Time and time again Norris tried to take the stick—every time the ship plunged and slipped and dropped, his hand was on the stick. Time after time Lee turned and snarled indistinguishable words back at his passenger. If he could have reached him, he'd have fixed it so that he couldn't interfere—

Then he'd go back to the old mental round. They must get through. His eyes roved from tachometer to thermometer to voltmeter, as his ears listened to the never faltering song of the motor. And finally the last peak of the "hump" was passed—but still the dangers clustered thickly around them. Not even a parachute would be any good—a jumper would hang in the trees and starve in that country.

"Hell Hole," a huge, rocky divide, was al-

most in sight. Straining forward with glittering eyes, as though to help his ship along, Rex's heart sank as he saw a snow-and-sleet storm ahead. In a few seconds the ship hurled itself into the thick of it. The chamois-skin face protector was a real blessing, now. Tremendous air currents twisted and turned the mighty bomber, and at intervals he could not see the tips of his own wings. Although his body was covered with so many layers of clothing that he could scarcely move in the cockpit, it was terribly cold. Minute after minute of torture, watching the altimeter needle vary as he ceaselessly fought the ship—it seemed as though he were utterly alone in the universe, fighting a losing battle with the giants of the storm.

Then, as though by magic, the ship drove out of the vortex of the storm, and in a moment more was roaring through a thin, gentle snowfall. He could see the ground vaguely now, covered with a thin mantle of white. It was a region of flat-topped plateaus, deep-furrowed ravines, and lower mountains. His heart bounded exultantly. In a few minutes more he'd be over the ranch-country, then one

more range, and then the Sacramento Valley.

At that moment it seemed as though his heart stopped beating. The motor, as though exhausted from its fight through the storm in that rarefied atmosphere, began to sputter. Desperately he jazzed the throttle. Sounded like plugged jets. But the motor only missed the more. Only seven or eight cylinders working—and getting worse.

With such despair in his heart as he had never felt in all his young life, he nosed down to make a desperate landing. There was a plateau down there a few hundred feet—looking smooth and beautiful, save for a few scrubby trees—but who could tell how deep the snow was, or what furrows and rocks lay beneath the all-covering blanket?

He circled back for the landing, and he was praying that the landing be safe, not damaging to the ship, and that the motor could be fixed. It would be a terrible landing to make—only a hundred and fifty yards to do it in, and the flat top fell away into sheer cliffs on all four sides. If the ship overran it, it would dash them down into the rocky crevices surrounding the field—

He felt the stick shake under his hand, and turned to meet the madly blazing eyes of Norris.

"Let me take her!" he roared as he cut the throttle.

"No!" shouted Rex, and put the throttle on again. The motor might pick up in the dive—

He turned to his work, circling down in a shallow spiral. All his being was concentrated on his work—he must hit right on the edge of that field, or nothing but sure death awaited them.

He felt a grip like steel on his shoulder, and as he turned Norris was yelling into his ear:

"Let me take her, I tell you! Lee, get your hand off that stick!"

The stick was wrenched from Rex's hand. In that second Rex became as mad as Norris. All the strain of that terrible trip came on him now, and for the moment he was a raging, unthinking automaton. They were close, now, and his hand grabbed the stick and wrenched it from Norris' grasp. If they lived, he'd have Norris kicked out of the service for interfering at that moment—

A stunning blow that brought myriad sparks

into being and seemed to sear his brain with a white-hot iron—and he knew no more.

He came to, still in the cockpit, and for a chaotic second did not know where he was. Snow-covered hills stretching away limitlessly to the horizon—

Then he saw Norris working over the motor. In a split-second it all came back to him. In a second he was out of the cockpit, moving awkwardly because of his parachute and heavy clothing. He saw a wheel lying near, and for the first time realized that the ship was tilted up at one side. The right end of the axle, wheel-less, was sticking in the ground, but the ship, miraculously, was not wrecked.

His brain white hot with fury, he threw himself at the man who had wrecked them—knocked him out—in that deserted country.

Big Norris side-stepped, and in a second had the slim Rex helpless in a bear-like hug. Curiously calm eyes glowed down into Lee's, and as Rex started to rave one big hand closed over his mouth.

"Listen, Rex," he said slowly, "I know all you're going to say, and I deserve it. There wasn't time enough to make a landing after I

hit you—knocked you out because I was scared to death."

He stopped, and released the quivering Lee. Rex's brain was in a whirl—somehow the calm deliberation of Norris' speech made him seem like a new man to him. That scarred face was composed and tranquil, as though the man had found peace there on top of the world.

"I'm a yellow dog, flying with anybody else," Norris went on slowly. "I've been in fourteen wrecks, and every time it was some other pilot who wrecked me, and smashed me up. Look at my face—and some time have a look at my body.

"Rex, I'm sorry. I felt as though I had to make the landing myself. But we will talk that over later. If you're game, I think we can get out of here, and get that packet through! The motor's fixed—plugged jets. You were out a half hour."

Somehow Rex seemed unable to move or speak under the spell of Norris' words. The importance of their mission came back to him, and he forgot all things personal as he listened to the desperate plan. At the end he said briefly:

"You're on. And Ralph—whatever you have done—this'll make up for it!"

On that icy, deserted plateau they shook hands under the hovering shadow of almost certain death, and then bent to their work.

The motor cranked easily, and with Rex at the stick and Norris' huge shoulders underneath the wing on the wheel-less side, they taxied the ship to the edge of the plateau and turned it. Rex shivered as he looked over and down into that hundred-foot ravine. But his heart did not falter.

They put the wheel on, but the nut had been sheared off and there was nothing to hold it. A wooden plug whittled to fit, was driven into the small hole where the safety cotter-pin belonged, and a shield of cloth wrapped between pin and wheel, to save the pin as much as possible. Then Norris smiled up at Rex, tense and white in the cockpit.

"Fly her, cowboy!" he barked, and climbed up on the tip of the lower wing on the side opposite the crippled wheel.

If the flyer's gods were with them, they might pick up speed before the wheel came off

again. Then, maybe Norris' weight would keep the axle from dragging. If it didn't, and it dragged near the edge of the cliff, ship and men would hurtle hundreds of feet downward to the rocks. If it came off too soon and they were marooned—starvation.

Stick as far over as it would go toward Norris, sprawled on the wing and holding to a strut, Rex gave the ship the gun.

There was a slight downward slope, into the wind. With every foot the bomber picked up speed through the five inches of snow as it hurtled toward the deadly cliff ahead. Rex was like a man in a trance, unconscious of fear, too strained to feel anything.

Fifty feet from the cliff, he felt the ship quiver. The wheel was coming off! Desperately he jerked back on the stick. The ship took the air for a second, and he saw the wheel go bowling over the cliff. Stick jammed against the side of the cockpit, with Norris' weight helping, he jammed the nose down. The ship bounced, cocked up on its side, on the good wheel. As it settled again, it was out over the ravine. A quick dive, and it had picked up fly-

ing speed. A few seconds later he had turned it, and climbing steadily was roaring along his way to Frisco again.

Norris huddled out there on the wing rather than crawl back to the cockpit again, and then out once more for the landing. Talk about nerve, Rex was thinking. Norris had conquered himself, and made that desperate take-off in his position, with another man at the stick.

One more range and then the Sacramento Valley. The air grew warmer as the ship dived downward. Fields of oil tanks, then Suisan Bay. The Golden Gate in sight! The sinking sun gilded the wires of the plane, its rays flashing back in blinding radiance as the happiest and most exhausted pilot in the whole world cut across the Bay, over the reddened roofs of San Francisco, and out to Crissey Field, flat and green in the shadow of the Presidio Hills.

With Norris clinging to the wing tip Rex landed. For a hundred feet the plane skimmed along the ground beside the hangars, and then the wheel-less side dropped as speed slackened. The wing crumpled as the plane spun around, and as it came to rest Rex fell asleep.

But he wasn't allowed to rest. Somehow news of the race against time across the country had leaked out; Crissey Field, though Rex had been too befogged to notice it, was hemmed in by a swirling mob of hero-worshippers. The big plane had been safely down no more than four minutes when they broke through the hastily-summoned cordon of soldiers, and Rex came to with a start when a dozen eager hands hauled him and Norris unceremoniously from the ship and started a triumphal march toward the commandant's office.

For three days, then, Rex Lee was in a happy swirl. Just one thing stood out. That was a moment when a tall, slim, smiling young blond —a youth a year or two older and an inch or two taller than he—was placed beside him at one of the half dozen dinners and luncheons he had to attend. For that young man was Slim Lindley. Rex Lee and Slim Lindley—

As Rex thought about it later, he grinned a bit self-consciously. He didn't for a minute think the things he had done the equal of that marvelous flight across the Atlantic. But just the same he felt a kind of kinship for the other man. The boy in the silver ship—if it hadn't

been for him, perhaps Rex Lee would never have bought himself a seaplane back at Los Angeles. And if he hadn't done that, he wouldn't have helped rescue Harry Tuttle, and if he hadn't been in on that he wouldn't have become a forest ranger—

"I might be selling nails at four cents a pound!" he chuckled to Ralph Norris when he told the big flyer the story, once they got some time to themselves.

It was almost three days before anybody bothered to tell them what the flight had been about. The government had not intended the public to know. But it was one of those things that can't be kept quiet; and so the newspapers had emblazoned on their front pages the startling news that, if the papers this pair were carrying across the country didn't reach San Francisco on time, there might be danger of terrible misunderstanding—or worse—around the Pacific. It seemed that the big war game in which the United States's Pacific Fleet was engaged had caused certain nations uneasiness; and it required the papers entrusted to Norris and Lee to smooth out the difficulty. A delay of six hours—

"It might have meant a different kind of flying for us," Ralph Norris told his new friend. "And I had all of that I ever want to see, back on the other side of the Atlantic."

"Just the same," Rex answered, "a fellow ought to be ready. I think the army air service is the job for me. It's easier to work for your country, sometimes, when you're right on her payroll!"

Six months later—after Rex had been able to persuade the air mail service to let him free from his contract—he followed up his idea. He flew his last cargo of letters into Cleveland; he turned in his plane with a final roar of the motor. Just before he got onto a train he went to a telegraph office and sent off a wire.

And a day and a half later, as the Pullman car neared San Antonio, a tall, blue-eyed, black-haired young man with bronzed, weather-beaten face, looked out the window, peered at the sky. Suddenly, into the range of his vision, sailed an Army Hawk—a roaring little pursuit ship. Out of the cockpit peered a head, and suddenly a leather-clad arm waved. Rex Lee, knowing that he wasn't seen, nevertheless forgot utterly the astounded passengers in the car.

With a wrench he jerked the Pullman window open, leaned dangerously far out. His arm waved at the little biplane high above him, and his voice yelled a husky greeting:

"Hey, Don! I'm coming back!"

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